

# NO OTHER GODS

by  
ALBERT  
MUNDAY



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ALBERT MUNDAY

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Copp Clark Co.  
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OTHER  
GODS  
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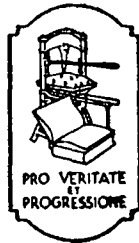
WITH AN AEROPLANE-MAN IN CLOUDLAND  
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WHEN ADVENTURE CAME TO BRIGHT STREET

# NO OTHER GODS

A NOVEL OF SASKATCHEWAN

By

ALBERT MUNDAY



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Toronto - - Canada

FROM  
R. S. PORTER  
LINDSAY

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The First Day of Grace . . . . .	11
II.	Early Morning at Pine Needle. . . . .	17
III.	Spirit of the Universe . . . . .	27
IV.	God's Five Acres . . . . .	32
V.	The Vision that Builds Empires . . . . .	40
VI.	A Call for Help . . . . .	46
VII.	A Fairy Comes to Life . . . . .	51
VIII.	Eyes of the Night . . . . .	56
IX.	The Call of the Wild . . . . .	62
X.	Cassius Plays His Part . . . . .	69
XI.	God Stakes a Homestead . . . . .	75
XII.	Fireside Disclosures . . . . .	84
XIII.	When High Courage Calls . . . . .	91
XIV.	Peter Plays His Part . . . . .	99
XV.	When the Spirit Guards . . . . .	105
XVI.	A Saga of the Night . . . . .	114
XVII.	Once to Every Man . . . . .	120
XVIII.	The Storm Passes . . . . .	127
XIX.	Sunshine and Shadow . . . . .	138
XX.	The Greater Friendship . . . . .	147
XXI.	Greater Love Hath No Man . . . . .	156
XXII.	Trail of Broken Dreams . . . . .	161
XXIII.	Creed of the West . . . . .	167
XXIV.	When a Man's a Man . . . . .	175
XXV.	When the Gods Answer . . . . .	183
XXVI.	The Tie that Binds . . . . .	189
XXVII.	False Worries a Bear . . . . .	198
XXVIII.	Clarions of War . . . . .	204

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXIX. When the Spirit Battles .....	210
XXX. The Second Day of Grace ....	216
XXXI. The Turn in the Lane .....	222
XXXII. When Mankind Fails .....	228
XXXIII. The Shadow of the Law .....	233
XXXIV. The Law of the Ranges .....	238
XXXV. Dummy Gives His Evidence ...	244
XXXVI. The Unseen Hand .....	249
XXXVII. A Green Button Is Lost .....	254
XXXVIII. The Spirit that Wins .....	262
XXXIX. The Last Day of Grace .....	268

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# No Other Gods

## CHAPTER I

### THE FIRST DAY OF GRACE

Jawl Killdare, acclaimed "king" of ranchers of the richest stretch of country in the West, believed in spirits; but he was not a spiritualist.

He believed that every man was the creator of his own spirit; a power that would inevitably mould and rule his destiny—whether for good or evil. Every man was as much the master of his own spirit as he was Lord of his own soul.

That is, if man has a soul. Perhaps he has, perhaps he hasn't. That point was as immaterial to Jawl as the seasonal change in Parisian modes. He reigned and waxed rich as an emperor over a vast domain—despite souls and fashions.

He had created his spirit and his spirit had made him—the greatest power in the ranges of Touchwood Hills. The greatest power *for good*, he added egotistically.

Some men worship a spirit of gold; plain everyday dollars and cents. It's their one and only God. It's power and plenty. Money-masters! What of the stigma? Others court at the dress-hem of fame; seeking to be lauded as public benefactors throughout the ages. But Jawl Killdare had taken

a different trail. A blaze through the unknown that had brought him to the throne of a far greater kingdom; acclaiming him a true brother to all mankind. In the journey thereof the golden seed rewarding manifold with a veritable harvest of flowing gold.

Flowing gold!

The vision of the simile fascinated the man.

From his vantage point, high on a rocky ledge, he commanded a picturesque panorama of a wide sweep of country. Herds of well-kept cattle dotted the verdant hills and valleys. In the haze of early morning he observed a long stretch of dark moving objects. The many colors resembled a carpet laid upon the green of the prairie. *His* stock being driven by *his* cowboys, he told himself. There was a note of pride in his voice. Beyond, against the waving skyline, he saw a prairie schooner. More new settlers, *still more* homesteaders, he mumbled with dismay. His gaze went back to his cattle. The larger herd was coming nearer. A veritable stream, it seemed, headed toward him. He felt himself now directly in the pathway of the sea of slow-moving objects.

He closed his eyes for a second. The stream of creatures now miraculously changed to a river of gold. It threatened to swamp him—to engulf him in its torrent! Unconsciously he reached out—like a drowning man; gasping for breath as he felt himself sinking! Scenes and objects darted before his eyes. Disaster . . . a tragic, pitiful end was upon him! Opening his eyes he shook his head; gazing around to regain composure. There was the pic-

ture again, the many herds grazing peacefully, the larger herd still headed toward him. He took a deep breath of relief. He felt a strangeness that he could not analyse. Something had happened in his mind. He had been affected! Some spirit, not of his creation or thought, had suddenly taken control, entirely obliterating his self-made spirit of complacency and power to help all mankind. What was it? Some fiendish trick of nature! Perhaps it was the high altitude of his vantage point. Perhaps the sun had dazzled him for the moment. And perhaps it was the sight of the prairie schooner, with its team of oxen that meandered at a snail's pace along the trail in the distance.

He gave up. Whatever it was . . . it was not right! *"Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. The highway of the upright is to depart from evil: he that keepeth his way preserveth his soul."*

The strangeness was certainly not akin to his own spirit, which had always governed his existence harmoniously; by reason of his creation of its being. He was the master of his spirit.

He was somewhat consoled by the thought and the text. He recalled he had been out on the ranges all night. It was fatigue. His physical tiredness revolting against his mental activity had brought about the sudden distressing phenomenon.

Refreshed by the soft, cool breeze of the June day he recovered somewhat. The invigorating glow of the air cheered and animated.

Observing his ranch in the restful valley below and the protecting hills beyond, rising to meet the

clear blue sky, he found a quick return to his complacency.

He proudly appraised the waving grain lands and velvety meadows that extended for almost a mile. He pictured the friendly robins hopping and chirping about the house lawns. He could see the milch cows grazing in the rolling meadows and the swarms of white chickens in the fields down the hill, near the well-filled barns. He could hear the dogs baying for their morning meal. Here was surely a scene of peace and plenty.

Now the cowboys were trooping to the cabin for breakfast. There were the horses in the corral, fed and saddled ready for a day on the ranges. There were the many log stables and the huge stacks of feed and produce. Surely a scene of prosperity and contentment. His spirit *was* right. It was serving him well and truly. See what it had accomplished!

A flutter in the ranch yard caught his attention—Valma, his daughter. He spoke the child's name aloud in his enthusiasm. She had captured the spirit, *his* spirit, he declared proudly. But with the girl it was just a fledgeling spirit at present.

Thought of the child's mother flashed to the man. Valma had never known her mother except by name. Jawl saw himself standing reverently at the side of a mound, high in the Touchwoods. He sensed the quiet sanctity of the holy ground. It was many years ago now. This success and these riches were of her making; more so than his. Her inspiration and her guidance had been responsible—and her check of an evil influence, an uncanny complex of nature that so often creeps into many

a man's life, had brought about his enviable position of power and glory.

He longed for the woman to be at his side this morning, this very moment, to enjoy the fruits of the years of struggle and privations. But suddenly he had been left alone—to enjoy . . . But it was *not* enjoyment or real happiness without the true helpmate whose vision and self-sacrifice had made the rewards possible.

She had left it all . . . as if saying; "The hard years are over now, Jawl. The years to come are those of reaping. See that you enjoy them—but reap well." With this message she had been taken away; in the birth pangs of the baby Valma.

With his great love of the child and the sacred memory and inspiration of her mother he had fought this evil streak that would come flashing to his mind. Why it came he did not know. He dreaded it, feared it, felt that it would one day mean the beginning of a tragic end. It had come again this very morning, like an usurper to dethrone him in his empire of power and glory. To vandalize his helpmate's bequest of happiness and prosperity.

She would never know how this specter haunted him. To give way, to link the surrender with her memory, would be to cast a blight on her sacredness; to suffer her memory to damnation.

He was relieved in the knowledge, however, that his great love for Valma had helped him to fight throughout the years. But she was growing up now. It would not be long before she would be leaving him to play her part in some man's life.

That would be the end. The specter would taunt him in its victory. It would conquer and crush him.

Throughout the years the girl, unknowingly, had taken her mother's place in guarding him against the influence, but the end of this guardianship would surely come. The child must never know! For her to have the least suspicion would be to damn her equally for the rest of her days.

He looked away from the valley, from the flutter of the girl's dress in the morning breeze, in an effort to change his thoughts. In a few seconds he felt better. I'm going to cross that bridge when I get to it, *not before*, he declared with confidence.

Glancing back to the ranch he watched the punchers. They were trooping from the cabin; exuberant in their fitness and anticipation of the day's activities. He smiled as he imagined their good-natured chafing of the colored cook. They were, indeed, boys who would never grow up. With them, youth was not a time of life, but a state of mind; a temper of the will, a vigor of the emotions.

"No, sir, those boys will *never* grow up. . . ."



## CHAPTER II

### EARLY MORNING AT PINE NEEDLE

"Good-bye, 'Snowflake,' queen of pie-makers! You shore got a black hide, but 'tis white as snow 'gainst what we'll think of you—if you don't jes' watch them pies!"

Shouting back this farewell warning to the cook, "False," cowboy clown of Pine Needle ranch, leading a single-file of smiling carefree punchers from the interior of the cabin, quickened his pace apprehensively.

Each puncher in turn, appearing at the open doorway, shot a jocular comment back across his shoulder; until there was a running volley of good-natured threats being fired at Snowflake; screened from view in the semi-darkness of the cabin.

Suddenly the line of cowboys bunched. There was a disorderly crowding from the rear, and with a noticeable shuffle for haste there was a marked softening of remarks.

Simultaneously, the protesting drawl of Snowflake could be heard above the parting utterances and the morning noises of the ranch.

"Go 'long, dar, False! False pusson yo' is! Yas-suh! Nothin' else but! Ah'm wantin' no advice nohow fho' False alahm pusson wha's yo' is. Lawsy, lawsy! Dem white folks done me hu't—but ah'm gwine retu'n good fo' evil. Yas-suh!"

Ah'm done fu'nish pies fo' suppah, an' ev'ybody jes' be mah gues's." Throwing a handful of crusts and crumbs, gathered from the table, Snowflake sent a flock of white and drab-colored chickens in the wake of the cowpunchers.

Suddenly a mass of naturally-wavy, auburn hair bobbed to light beneath the arm of the aged negress. Bright, dilated eyes of a pretty, white girl in her 'teens glanced out to the cabin yard, now lively with a score of inquisitive hens and pullets anticipating another handout.

"Mighty good man, is False, Snowy. Jes' every bit as good as his name," ventured the child.

"Dat pusson! As good as his name? Dat name False? Uh huh!" laughed Snowflake, stroking the girl's golden tresses.

"Snowy, oh Snowy! Jes' reckon you sent them boys away all ready for pie every minute of the day. They'll be back long 'fore sundown. Sure will have a hungry bunch to feed. Snowy, will I put them custard pies in the outside cooler? Guess False, and all them other pie-punchers, as you call them, are clear away from the corral by now."

Just at that moment a long-legged pup, supporting a bandaged paw and displaying scars of cat scratches on its nose, limped into the picture between the feet of the girl. Two kittens followed playfully, and one, not knowing from tragic experience that two stone steps took one from the cabin doorstep to the ground, did a double somersault, landing square on the back of a hen giving a first lesson in dust bathing to a brood of chirping chicks.

There was a feathered attack, a furry retreat,

and an attempted rescue that came as a yawning growl, as the ruffled kitten pawed its way back to a position on the doorstep.

"Lawsy, lawsy, dat fool long-leg pup hound of a dawg gwine to pestah dat debil-eyed pussycat of a kitten—an' dat dust-eatin' chicken gwine to pestah dat l'le cat! Hot diggity dawg! If ev'ythin' ain't whong with ev'body! Shoos! Scats! Ev'ybody wha's no bisness heah git away an' cast yo' eyes on yo' own bisness, an' leab wukkin' folks 'lone!"

Snowflake's words, and the forceful waving of her bare arm as she turned to enter the cabin, changed the scene from one of contentment to one of impending tragedy. Hens, pullets, and chicks, necks extended and heads low, scurried from the doorway; kittens covered the distance from the doorstep to the seclusion afforded at the rear of a rain water barrel in a flash. The pup, feeling the full responsibility, slunk back to the protection of the wood box at the stove. Then, as sudden as all had happened, the arrival of False on his saddle-beast, "Sugar."

He stopped short, but Sugar feeling a slackening of the lines advanced a few steps until its head was in the doorway. Seeing the form of Snowflake, bending down to pick up a spoon, the animal stretched its neck and head and gave the negress a friendly bunt.

"That's e-e-nough! Sugar," was False's surprised and almost inaudible word of caution. Reining his horse back quickly and pressing his heels into the animal's flanks he rode out of sight into a nearby poplar bluff.

Regaining her feet, Snowflake turned to the door, but the kittens, engrossed in a friendly wrestling match in the sunshine, were in her way. To avoid stepping on them she hesitated; thus giving False and Sugar the few seconds of grace necessary to cover the escape.

The child, carrying two steaming, custard pies, one balanced on each outstretched palm, called to the woman for a clear doorway. Immediately, the attitude of Snowflake's mind changed from one of puzzlement and ruffled dignity to one of servitude and great love for the girl.

"Yas, Mis' Valma. Bettah watch dem chickens, an' dat long-leg hound! An' dat good-fo'-nothin' roostah! Lawsy, dat rooster fellah sho'll lead dem hens to dat coolah. Dat fellah can smell pies all same as dem pie-punchers. Wheah pies are, sho' they are." She swept the kittens to one side with her red-slippered foot, and then held Valma's arm as the child stepped down to the ground.

Making her way along the front and round the end of the cabin Valma placed the pies on a rough table. She glanced up at the cooler, and then looked for a box on which to stand to reach from the table. On second thoughts, she decided to return to the cabin for two more pies.

Placing the extra pies on the table, she took a kitchen chair from the rear of the cabin and placed it so as to serve as a step to the cooler. Eyeing a piece of crust overhanging the edge of one of the pies she nonchalantly broke it off.

Inquisitive hens, led by the "no-good" rooster, were now stealing up inch by inch in their curiosity.

Valma glanced at them out of the corner of her eye. Stepping onto the chair she observed the pup limp into the scene.

This was the last straw!

She turned and faced her audience.

"No good a' tall, you chickens! An' let me caution you, Mr. Rooster! There's nary a bit of pie for chickens, 'cept what's 'leftovers' from supper. An' I'm tellin', that's not as much as a taste for one of the wee chicks. So, scoot, an' hunt worms! An' you, 'Crash,' " she pointed a finger at the pup, "no pie for dogs that ain't smart 'nough to chase them fool rabbits 'way from the cabbage patch. Nary a l'le bit for sech dogs. Now act dog-like. Live up to your name, an' *crash* through them bushes, an' get on the trail of somethin' else but trouble. An' from now on remember—"

Valma stopped suddenly. A frown criss-crossed her forehead. A nerve-racking screeching held her attention.

Sensing a pitiful cry for help, she jumped from the chair and ran down the pathway to the corral. Not hearing a repetition of the summons, she stopped; waiting for some sign to guide her. "Some squirrel or chipmunk in trouble," she conjectured. "Maybe a domestic difference." She listened intently.

Simultaneously, as her ears caught the chattering, her eyes caught sight of a blue-gray squirrel hanging head down from a branch of a sugar maple.

She crept cautiously toward the tree, but the creature, trying vainly to free itself, became alarmed

at the girl's approach. A short, harsh screech stopped her.

"Not goin' to hurt you," she whispered, comfortingly. "Nary a l'le bit—jes' want to help you." She started to creep closer, while the trapped animal surveyed her with bright and glaring eyes.

When within ten feet of the creature she extended her arm, offering the piece of pie-crust as evidence of friendship. The squirrel continued its struggle for freedom. Gradually the distance between the girl and the animal lessened, until she could have caught it if she had made a rush. Instead, she held the outstretched arm and hand, still offering the pastry, exactly where it was, and then drew her body closer by stepping up so slowly that there was practically no sign of movement. Slowly extending her arm again, then making a quick grasp, her fingers closed round the furry, writhing body.

"Now—now—now! Don't tire yourself all out for nothin'!" she solaced. The creature's leg had been trapped in a twist of a dead branch. Snapping the twig off the girl released the limb.

Guarding against possible attack from the animal's sharp and quick teeth, Valma stooped and recovered the crust, which had dropped when she had caught the squirrel. Offering it to the creature, she was surprised when it nibbled excitedly in acceptance. She had expected refusal and resistance.

"Must have been somethin' powerful scarey to scare you to that fix. An' a good thing for you an' your hide that I came, or else, maybe, 'Affee,' our champion field-mouser, would have roped you for



sure. Affee's powerful fond of squirrels. Eats head, an' tail, an' ev'ythin'!"

Valma allowed her fingers to sink deeper into the warm, furry sides of the trembling animal. She thought of how Affee would relish a meal off those sleek, fat, and tender sides; so warm in her fingers. She pictured the cat after such a meal—sprawled on the kitchen floor in front of the box stove, purring the time away; licking its lips for hours.

"Yes-sir! Jes' as well I ran as fast as I know how," Valma gave voice to her gladness in victory over Affee. "Better watch out, anyhow, 'cause Affee's a watchful critter, an' might catch you when I'm not lookin'. Figure I'll take you over to God's Five Acres. You'll be safe there, an' soon be better, an' able to scamper away. Up an' down them maples—much as you like. Maybe, though, you'll want to stay—with my pets. An'—remember, *never any bitin'!*" She emphasized the last three words as the squirrel nibbled on an unguarded finger.

Valma's petting of the creature was cut short by noises of a commotion in the direction of the cabin. There was a hoarse shout, followed by a crashing, as if the whole cabin, with its complement of pots and pans and dishes and furniture had suddenly collapsed. It was a shrieking and a shouting, accompanied by an alarming clucking of chickens—the like of which had never been heard before in the valley of Touchwood Hills.

Hugging the squirrel close to her shoulder, Valma, with a grave feeling of tragedy, rushed up the trail. As she reached the turn that brought the cabin into view she could hardly believe her eyes.

Where she had left the four custard pies safely on the table, there was a hopeless chaos; pots and pans, furniture and chickens, all in one indescribable affray. Valma stopped for a moment to survey the scene at long distance. She could see the legs of a cowpuncher who was caught beneath the overturned table. Her eyes caught sight of several chickens struggling to free themselves from the weight of various objects.

Observing Snowflake, armed with a huge corn broom, dashing from the cabin, Valma hurried.

Snowflake stopped and stood aghast.

"Fo'—de—Lawd's—sakes!" she bristled, recovering herself somewhat.

"Nah! For—de—pie's—sakes!" The overturned table and chair moved as False commenced to extricate himself. Lifting his face from the center of one of the pies he repeated the correction.

Forcing the debris up with his back, the cowpuncher automatically released several of the imprisoned chickens. Pots and pans, and every object within range, had acquired a generous coating of custard. Other chickens, that had escaped capture in the commotion, were now stealing secondarily nearer to the shattered pie-crusts that littered the scene like a first snow flurry.

"Yes, siree! 'Twas for the pie's sakes!" emphasized False, standing erect and wiping the custard from his face. "'Tis no fault of mine. Reckon I didn't jes' act in time to herd them fool chickens from them pies. Thar they were, a-peckin', and a-peckin', and I kinda shooed 'em—easy like. But they no sabby, an' then I gets to buckin', an' gives

them the rush act. Guess I must've slipped on that pesky dog pan." False, unbuttoning his collar, opened the neckband of his shirt and scooped a liberal helping of custard from off his neck.

Snowflake, the broom raised defiantly across her shoulder, shook her head gravely.

"De Lawd Almighty knows how ah evah libes with mah will powah," she crooned, her eyes glistening with tears, "an' ev'y mawnin' I'se says, 'Gawd, assist yo' child, Snowflake, to keep mah tempah. Assist yo' child to be all an' say nothing'!" There was a touch of pathos in the woman's voice. She fumbled with her apron. Lifting a tattered edge she placed it gently to her moistened eyes.

Suddenly the apron dropped. Snowflake straightened herself. There was a look of determination on her face.

"But, sometimes, ah feels like actin' like ah feels. Ah gets a-screamin', an' a powahful strong actin' feelin' in mah bones an' all ovah me, sho' do!" Swerving to one side she raised the broom high in the air. She made a charge at False.

Gazing at the weapon nervously, False endeavoured to jump clear of the overturned chair. One of his high heels caught in a broken rung; throwing him headlong to the ground. The broom struck him forcibly as he shouted a protest.

"Go 'long, yo' sho' False alahm, 'fore ah lose mah tempah, an' bé 'bliged to pray ovah an' ovah 'gain to get de good Lawd to forgive his child!" The woman brought the broom down and down again until the puncher regained his feet.

Quickly recovering his steeple-crown hat, crushed

and besmirched, he ducked several yards to safety, and then stopped and looked back. He was about to shout another explanation, but a spirited wave of the broom, and a short advance by Snowflake discouraged him.

It was final. False realized it, suppressing further protest.

He started to walk away, then suddenly turned and faced the cook. He had a sunburnt, pleasant countenance. Smiling, he displayed white teeth in a manner that added to the geniality of his personality.

"Guess, I'll go now, Sootflake." There was a suggestion of challenge in his words. "Yes, really, Sootflake, I must be goin'. Sorry I cannot stay—the boys are waitin'. Was on my way once already. Good-bye, *au revoir*, toodle-loo!"

He retreated to the edge of the bluff. The snapping of dried twigs and the crunching of dead leaves told of his haste.

Ramming his head into his hat with an emphasis of exasperation, the cowpuncher felt uncharitably disposed toward Snowflake, in particular, and custard pies, in general.

## CHAPTER III

### SPIRIT OF THE UNIVERSE

As the cowpuncher disappeared, Snowflake dropped the broom. She turned and faced Valma.

"Specs, I'm to blame a l'le bit, Snowy. 'Cause I ran away an' left them pies. This busy squirrel was hurt, an' scared—and I hurried to help him." She held the creature at arm's length, displaying a limp leg that swayed helplessly as the cripple writhed in her hands.

The girl inspected the injury.

"Another urgent case for Doctor Snowflake. But —'Twecky' has his nurse, Snowy. Yes-sir, I'll see that you get better mighty soon." Valma held the creature up to the waiting hands of the woman.

"Glo'y, glo'y, dat's de l'le pu'ple fellah dat come 'long fo' suppah las' two night, sho' is." The negress took the squirrel from the child with tender care. "Theah, l'le pu'ple fellah, don't get f'ightened none, yo' is wheah yo' safe," she consoled, stroking the velvety fur. "An' Mis' Valma, yo'—is a saviour," she assured, leading the way to the cabin.

Wrapping the squirrel snugly in a piece of red blanket, the woman placed it into a small bird cage that had hung suspended from the tamarack rafters ever since "London," an Englishman, had disappeared from the ranch in a mysterious manner. Unknown and unheralded he had arrived at the

ranch, carrying a bird cage containing a singing canary. Upon introducing himself he had expressed a desire "to learn ranching."

The story of London and his devotion to "England," the feathered pet he had carried all the way from the Homeland, was a well known story of the ranges.

And the story of London's strange disappearance into the vast and little known country beyond the Touchwoods was still a grim and unsolved mystery of the province.

No one at the ranch knew the man's right name. Upon his arrival he had given it in full, but the cowpunchers, in their exuberance of welcome, had given him the sobriquet "London," and had re-christened his songster "England."

Valma's eyes dimmed with tears as she stood at the table watching Snowflake dust off the top of the cage.

Incident after incident of the man and his canary came back to her as she gazed through the wires at the bundle of red. The blanket moved slightly; two bulging eyes peeped at the child. For the second she was embarrassed. She ran a finger along the floor ledge of the cage with a definite firmness as if to wipe out memories associated with it.

The time of the canary's escape came back vividly.

The tiny creature had struggled to freedom through the hole where the water bowl had lodged. She had been singing while feeding the pet and it was chirping in answer. When about to replace the glass bowl, brimming over with fresh water, she



had screamed as a streak of yellow flashed past her. The bird had fluttered to the open window. With a farewell chirp of joy it had flown away.

England was not seen again, although everyone at the ranch searched for it many days.

Then London disappeared.

His departure was as sudden as his arrival.

Months later, three punchers from Pine Needle, happened across a deserted shack, high in the pine-clad Touchwoods. Forcing the door they found a crude, home-made bird cage, suspended from a rafter. In the cage was a diminutive skeleton. A sprinkling of faded, yellow feathers completed the story.

But London was missing.

A study of the shack indicated a sorrowful sequel. There had been a savage struggle and apparently a tragedy.

A drop of warm water splashed onto the back of Valma's hand. She looked up quickly. Snowflake was crying. She too had memories of the missing visitor.

"I'll never forget—dat fellah—London."

The girl brightened at mention of the man's name.

"He sure taught me heaps 'bout everythin'. 'Bout the flowers, an' how to grow them—'tender-foot' ones, hollyhocks, nas—tur—shums, marigolds. An' he told me a lot 'bout trees, an' birds, an'—thinkin'. An' 'bout God, too." The child dropped her voice reverently. "He called God a spirit, what's in everybody. A happy spirit, he said. An' told me everybody could find the spirit in everythin'

an' everybody, *if they looked for it!* Said 'twas in trees, an' in the rapids, an' the falls over at Kutawa, an' in flowers, an'—in the air 'bout us. Funny thing, that. Said God is the spirit 'cause he wants all folks an' animals, an' trees to be happy, an' that this spirit would guard you 'gainst all harm."

A movement of the bundle in the cage interrupted the girl's thoughts. The coal black eyes peeped again from the folds.

"Dat's right, Mis' Valma, but I'se thinkin' dat pu'ple hide fellah don't know 'bout dat spirit. Ah knows all 'bout God, an' de Lawd. But dat spirit, Mis' Valma? Yo' sho it's—to guard yo'? Sho' didn't guard l'le pu'ple fellah none!"

Snowflake's eyes dilated and then narrowed as she tried to follow the girl's thoughts.

"Yes, yes, Snowy," explained Valma, quickly. "You see the spirit was guardin' the squirrel, like it's 'posed to, an'—maybe, saved its life! But—well, maybe the spirit couldn't save—all its life, so the tiny leg got hurt." The child's brow furrowed in thought. "An', don't you understand, Snowy? Maybe if the squirrel hadn't got caught in the branch, like when I found it, he might've got himself—killed! Somethin' scared him mighty bad, an' he was rushin' away, an,—sure 'nough the spirit knew it wasn't good for it to rush, an' so saved its life by jes' catchin' its leg in a branch. Couldn't help hurtin' its leg, jes' a l'le bit. Now, don't—you—understand?"

"Lawsy, de spirit—done—have to—break l'le pu'ple fellah's leg to—prevent—prevent him from *hu't?* Lawsy, lawsy!"

The woman shook her head. The psychology of Valma was beyond understanding.

She lifted the cage gently and placed it near the stove.

An hour later, when the squirrel was warm, Snowflake set the injured limb in splints made from a balsam twig. She bandaged it as skilfully as a careful practitioner.

Standing at the doorway of the cabin, holding the cage, she called Valma from the horse barn, where the child was grooming her saddle-beast, "Peter."

"Any sign of 'Dummy' or Pop?" enquired Valma, taking the cage. "Seems as if they've gone clear to Echo Valley, an' reckon Dummy's needed powerful bad to 'tend Conova's hind leg. I was lookin' at it jes' now, an' 'tis no better. That barbed wire's 'gainst the law—for animals, an' never did any good, 'cept harm!" Valma reflected, as she turned to go.

Snowflake held the child a few seconds, while she tested the catch on the cage door.

"Theah, l'le pu'ple fellah, yo' sho'ly be safe in dat cosy home down on God's Five Acres, an' with Mis' Valma, as a nu'se—lawsy! Yo' is suttently in all de clovers!"

She remained standing at the doorway as the child made her way toward the corral pathway. As the girl passed from view round a bend, Snowflake turned into the cabin to resume her work.

## CHAPTER IV

### GOD'S FIVE ACRES

"God's Five Acres," the province of Valma, where lived the child's many pets, was known far and wide.

A visiting rancher or cowboy is apt to forget the actual name of a ranch, and to remember the place of call or work by his impressions of the people associated with it. Whenever a person called at Pine Needle they would be proudly shown a range of verdant hills nearby, among which was a hidden glen. It often happened that visitors would speak of the valley, requesting to see it and to hear all about it, before those at the ranch had an opportunity to suggest a trip to the girl's domain.

That one's visit to the scene left a deep and lasting impression, one in which reverence to a divine spirit was strongly in evidence, was borne out time and time again in stories circulated. There was always a keen and respected interest for news of the ranch that held within its portals such a haven of understanding friendship for animal and man alike.

The stories gave an entirely new picture of ranch life.

They told of different activities from those so often associated with cowpunchers and life on the ranges. There was a conspicuous absence of ran-

corous play, rowdiness, maudlin tricks, ostentatious use of firearms, and braggardism. There was no disregard of law and order, no discouraging influences to the development of one's high ideals toward rendering greater service to a fellow creature.

The stories told that here in the heart of the Touchwoods was a home where everyone aimed and strived to help toward general betterment; finding joy in the undertaking.

Cowboy after cowboy who had ridden at Pine Needle had returned with the avowed intention of spending the rest of his days in its service. With their work and interest had come a new spirit. A spirit of happiness in accomplishment. A happiness that must come sooner or later to every man, and without which there can be no rest, contentment and real understanding.

Why?

No one could really answer the question.

Certainly it was not because of holding forth religious meetings at Pine Needle, or the harboring of a "sky-pilot." In all its history, the ranch had only been privileged with one such meeting and two pastoral calls; Father Devine had been the guest to honor the settlement on the three occasions. But certain it was that the free and open life, and an incentive to every man to think for himself, to lay himself open for knowledge and guidance, helped materially toward achievement.

To the throne of this spirit came Valma this June day.

Hugging the cage in which the squirrel rested, she stopped at the entrance to the glen.

God's Five Acres was not limited to the number of acres that one might be led to assume by reason of its name. It contained a larger tract, being more than three hundred yards from north to south, and about one hundred yards from east to west.

It was bordered on the west by an unwooded foothill. Smooth and velvety, the hill allowed free rein to warm, invigorating breezes. On the east, higher, poplar-clad hills sheltered the area from cold, raw winds. At the south end, a towering buttress of rock barricaded three-quarters of the width of the valley. The other quarter, at the southwest corner, was an open gap, by reason of the abrupt ending of the foothill and the precipice of the buttress. At this point the ground dropped abruptly for fifty feet where it stretched out in a rolling tract of land. The gap afforded a picturesque panorama of pasture lands on which could be seen the grazing herds of Pine Needle.

From a cleft near the top of the rocks in the southeast corner, a column of crystal water flowed in an iridescent display to a pool that spanned the valley. From the pool the water gurgled among the rocks at the southwest, then sprayed into a cataract to fertile lands below.

Across the north end a rugged wall of rock extended. This barrier was almost precipitous on the north face, and except for a gorge, midway and about three feet in width, completely cut off access to the valley from the outside. The gorge served as a passageway.

At this opening, a white-painted, garden gate, plumb with the face of the wall, was closed and

latched. The gate, made by London, served to bar admittance to stray cattle, while from within it discouraged any attempt on the part of the pets to venture outside.

Closing and latching the gate behind her, Valma walked through the entrance. She stopped as she reached the open meadow.

Turning round she looked up to one side where some white lettering was discernable on a smooth portion of the south face of the wall. Holding the cage high she pointed to an inscription.

"Look, Tweekey, you see that welcome? No! Guess squirrels can't read none, but you should understand, an' you *will* soon." There was firm resignation in her declaration. "Well, I'll read it, an' jes' you remember, 'cause you're a guest—at present, an' that's all! Now, listen! It says:

*'Hail guest! We ask not what thou art  
If friend, we greet thee—hand an' heart.  
If stranger, sech no longer be.  
If foe, our love shall conquer thee.'*

"That's all, but jes' you remember, an' try to understand, same as all law-bidin' squirrels."

Valma glanced down the fairway; rich in crimson and purple chicory blossoms.

The child surveyed "Mirror" pool, shimmering the myriad colors of the towering temple of rock. She smiled happily as she gazed at a white-washed log building half way along the western edge. She noted that the surrounding garden, bordered by a low-paling fence, was colorful in its blossoms of

"tenderfoot" flowers. London was right, she meditated—it is June and all are in blossom.

Suddenly her expression changed. She scanned the valley from end to end.

Taking a few paces to one side, she gazed at a point that had been hidden from view by the cabin and the garden of jonquils, peonies, and hollyhocks.

She smiled amusedly as she sighted a donkey, a black lamb, and a wild goose, close together. The donkey and the lamb were nibbling the grass near the water's edge, while the goose, a few feet away, was stretching its neck, digging industriously into the bed of the pool.

"Yoo—hoo! That's what I call right good companionship!" she greeted, so that her words would carry to the pets.

Instantly, the donkey's head lifted. Its ears cupped and its head turned simultaneously. The next second it trotted awkwardly down the meadow, followed by the lamb.

The goose, preoccupied at digging an inch deeper, did not see the animals leave, and when at last it withdrew its beak from the sands of the pool, it gave a short, quiet honk of dismay. Turning in search of its companions, it saw them half way down the fairway.

"Yoo—hoo! 'Flight-Commander,' better hurry!" Valma directed her voice to the goose. "But, watch that patched-up wing!" she cautioned.

The bird heard the girl's voice. It gave a clumsy lurch and then flew toward her.

Landing at her feet it gave a raucous cry.

"An' why didn't you tribe wait for me at the



gate?" she remonstrated as the animals reached her. The donkey nudged her, while the lamb became interested in a single blade of grass near her foot.

"A fine way to greet a new guest! That's not manners!" She stamped her foot and shook her head to emphasize her chagrin. "If I hadn't seen you all friendly like—well, it's jes' a good thing for all of you!"

Giving each a comforting pat, Valma lifted the cage to the donkey's back. With Flight-Commander a few paces ahead and the lamb walking at her side, the party started toward the cabin.

The goose turned its head, first to one side and then to the other. Eyeing the other members of the procession, it took unerring notice of the distance between its own position and that of Valma's. Instinctively, the bird slowed or quickened its pace to keep the distance about four feet.

The girl admired the bird as it strutted lordly before her. She noted the crimson eyes, the lemon-colored beak, the straight and long neck, the light grey of its back, the orange-colored legs. She visualized the mighty wings, strong and swift, outstretched in action; outstripping the winds of the upper levels. Particularly, did she perceive the creature's sense of leadership.

"A born leader—for sure," she congratulated. "But, jes' see what being a leader, a commander, a general, a captain, did for you! If you had been jes' a buck private, or a fussy corporal, or anythin' up to a second in command, instead of a *gallant* leader of that long, long triangle of geese—I mean

geeses—no, geese, 'way up near the roof of the sky when that homesteader shot, an' hit your wing, an' broke it, you'd still be flyin' with your own folks. Suppose geese can be called folks? So, Mr. Flight-Commander Gander, do you jes' see, an' realize what being a leader did for *you*?"

The girl was silent for a few seconds as she watched the goose.

"Well!—Why don't you answer? What have you got to say?"

"Ya-honk!—Ya-honk!" Flight-Commander's reply carried across the meadow.

"Yoo—hoo! That's right! That's what I thought you would say!"

The girl's arm, supporting the cage, was across the back of the donkey. She gave the animal a firm pat.

"You heard that 'King'—every word? An' you too—'Blacky!' Every word you heard!" She slowed her pace to give the lamb an opportunity to catch up. "Flight-Commander says how he's mighty pleased he *was* the leader. Sure he was shot down, but reckon 'twas to be, 'cause now he's a leader of *us*! That's King, an' Blacky, an' Tweeky, an' me! Did you ever? Says its better than leadin' geeses!"

"An' poor I'le Blacky! To think that your mother deserted you 'cause you were born black? That's a fine kind of a Ma to have—I'm tellin' you."

Reaching the garden fence, Valma lifted the cage from the donkey's back. She was about to enter the cabin when her attention was caught by a dull fawn object moving down the eastern slope. It

was flecked with black and touches of pure white.

She recognized the creature as a badger, but was puzzled by its unnatural action. It moved in fitful jerks. Every few seconds it struggled as if in pain.

Opening the door of the cabin and placing the cage on a chair, she turned to watch the animal.

In another instant she had decided.

Walking cautiously, she reached the badger without causing it alarm. She bent down slowly.

Tears came to her eyes. It was minus an eye and was so thin, worn and weak that it could hardly crawl another foot. Where it had come from, or how it received its injuries, no one ever knew, but Valma felt that her mission at God's Five Acres was by no means finished. Had she but known just a modicum of the future she would have realized that her compassionate duties had only just started.

\* \* \*

Late the following evening Pine Needle ranch was thrown into a state of great anxiety. Valma was missing. Since early morning she had been away from the ranch. At first it was thought that she had accompanied a party of cowpunchers, but when they returned and did not know of her whereabouts a search of the ranch and immediate surrounding country was made. Just as dusk swept across the prairie it was realized that the girl was lost.

## CHAPTER V

### THE VISION THAT BUILDS EMPIRES

A yoke of big, black oxen, hitched to a ramshackle wagon, sauntered along the government telegraph trail, running from Fort Qu'Appelle to Prince Albert. Numerous boulders, protruding from deep ruts, made the task an arduous one for the animals, and often, in an attempt to avoid the larger stones, they sought the short, worn grass at the side of the trail; until a sharp command, and a loud crack of a black-snake whip in the hands of Cay Pryor brought the team back to the tracks at an awkward gait.

Along this same pfairie trail the North West Field Forces marched to suppress the rebellion of 1885, and a few months later, along its twists and turns, Cree Indians loped leisurely for the signing of treaties at the Fort.

But these facts of an empire victory did not interest Cay. Hunched on the seat he meditated. The past few years had been the most trying of his fifty-five. The ensuing five years were going to make a new chapter in a story of a broken career. From a bankrupt business in the Homeland he had journeyed to the prairies, and, filing blind on homesteads for himself and son, had started for the unknown country beyond the waving skyline.

The trail hugged the western slope of the

Qu'Appelle valley. To the west and northwest the rocky ridge reached down and bordered the trail, while to the east and northeast, stoney pasture lands sloped to cultivated flats in the valley below. Varied crops of grain and produce shimmered in the June sunlight; appearing like a gigantic, crazy quilt spread over the country-side. Here and there in the sheltered places the white-washed log cabins of homesteaders stood out in bold relief against the bright green of the poplars. A few of the dwellings, chivalric in their clearings, gave Cay a feeling of indomitability that urged him to his location.

Scanning the country far ahead, and catching sight of a range of foothills, dim in the noonday haze, his mind became obsessed with zealous hopes and future plans.

Occasionally, when the oxen attempted to leave the trail, the man's lips framed a caution, but the half-uttered sentences were lost in the din of camp utensils and the rattling of the wagon as it lumbered along the ridge.

Eric, seated beside his father, a rifle across his knees, glanced from the ridge to scattered pines and clumps of poplar and spruce in search of game. Of average height, erect, he was the type of man desired in the West. His face, lightly tanned, displayed strong possibilities of sterling character.

Throughout the long afternoon the oxen plodded along the trail. Toward evening the men prepared to make camp at the edge of a wooded stretch; close to a canyon stream.

Cay unhitched the oxen and tethered the leader,

allowing the follower its freedom; confident of the animals' contentment in the knee-deep peavine.

Jumping from the wagon, Eric, carrying the rifle, walked among the trees at the bank of the creek. The tang of the atmosphere was invigorating. He took several long, deep breaths. It seems that he could not inhale enough of the wine-like air. The silver of the birches and the russet of the pines, with their towering tips and leafy boughs, were enthralling to eyes accustomed to city streets and sights. It was good to be alive in such a paradise, and on such an evening!

Staring and wondering at the glory of all nature, consciousness of the rifle passed from Eric's mind.

Suddenly, a startled fawn darted with lightning speed across a clearing directly ahead. Eric took aim and fired. There was a crashing in the underbrush and then silence.

With the exultant thrill of a victor, Eric ran to the edge of the clearing.

He stopped and looked down at the creature that lay struggling. A stream of crimson-red was flowing from a wound in its neck.

Eric did not move. He stood bewildered at a power that gives a man impulse and motive for such actions. A power that gives such striking contrast of thrill and pang was beyond his understanding.

The creature's trembling body became inert. The flow of blood stopped.

Presently, the fawn's head moved weakly; turning in the man's direction. Eyes, appealing, pitiful, penetrated him. He could not move. He seemed

held in a strange, hypnotic spell; asking why life, when at its happiest, should be taken so ruthlessly. *It was indeed good to be alive in such a paradise, and on such an evening!* The words left a sting.

Taking his handkerchief Eric dabbed the blood from the wound. After a few moments he made his way to the wagon for first aid supplies. Later he dressed the wound; hoping to save the fawn's life.

It was a troubled sleep for the young homesteader that night. In his dreams he saw himself standing in the center of a clearing. He was ready to raise his rifle at an instant's notice. Giant trees towered above on every side; dwarfing him to Lilliputian smallness. From behind each massive trunk, and from huge branches, pairs of enormous eyes, glaring, accusing, penetrating, were affixed upon him. He felt rooted to the spot; totally unable to move his arms to use the rifle. Under great strain he turned his head to one side, hoping to avoid the piercing gaze of the leviathans, but from behind, as well as from every conceivable angle and direction, the fierce, colossal eyes riveted their accusation upon him. Now the titanic orbs started to close in with terrifying slowness; the numerous circles maintaining perfect alinement. He was now gazing into one monstrous pair that held him in a hypnotic exorcism. The rolling balls of fire threatened to crush him in their portentous spell. Dropping his rifle he tried to shout a warning, an appeal, a prayer, but his voice was gone. He summoned every atom of strength to beg forgiveness; to plead

for a chance to explain, to pray for a few seconds of time.

"Don't!—God!—help! No, no!" His strength, galvanized to the breaking-point, was barely sufficient to whisper the supplication. "God!—give me time! Time to tell—"

A mist rolled before his eyes. His arms struggled in protection! He felt his shoulders being crushed! Now the film of mist started to clear. Here again, were those gigantic eyes, gradually closing in to strike the final blow. He tried to cry out; to repeat the supplication. He heard a voice. Some person was speaking. The mist was almost cleared. He blinked a few times, then looked squarely into the eyes of his father; leaning across the bed, shaking him by the shoulders.

"Serves you jolly well right! I told you that lobster and six eggs and those wild strawberries would show you new circus tricks. Next time, you'll mind my word!"

Dressing hurriedly, Eric rushed to where the fawn rested on a bedding of boughs and leaves. He wondered if the ebbing spark of life had died out during the night; he could never forgive himself for having slain such a comely creature.

Its flecked, chestnut-tawny form was elegant in its symmetry. Its delicate harmony of shades and its silken gloss fascinated.

It was as still as death.

A lump came to Eric's throat. He placed his hand close to the animal's shoulder. He felt easier as he sensed a faint pulsation. He re-dressed the wound, then made a bedding of boughs and leaves



in the wagon. When ready to start on the trail, the men lifted the fawn into the vehicle. Eric planned to release the animal as soon as it recovered.

## CHAPTER VI

### A CALL FOR HELP

Day after day the oxen followed the winding trail northwest over the undulating prairies; solemn and silence under the endless sky. Settlers' homes became more scattered as they reached further north; until after a while the habitations were conspicuous by their absence. At the end of the fifth day the trail started to cross the foothills that belonged to the great ranches. Beyond the first range the road dipped to the plateau of Kutawa creek.

At a point where the trail turned abruptly toward the south, Cay, unfolding a large begrimed map, verified his location. A few moments later he led the oxen off the trail, heading north across the prairie in the direction of a second range.

It was early evening, and the sun had not yet dropped from sight behind the ridge that topped the western skyline, when Cay stopped the oxen. Camp duffle was thrown out, and presently a column of blue smoke rolled lazily aloft, until, caught by a light current of air, it was swept away in fantastic curliques.

While the men made camp they talked.

"It once sounded like a fairy story—this coming out to the wilds and 'roughing it' to make a fortune. But it's getting more real every hour. And

especially, the action part of the story," hinted Cay, drawing a fallen log nearer to the fire.

"Yes, but there's no fairy queen waving her magic wand over us. All I can see is honest-to-goodness hard work. No rainbow. No gold. Not even a peep at anything that looks like a fairy."

There was silence.

Eric turned from the fire. His eyes narrowed as he tried to gaze through the darkness in the direction of Kutawa canyon.

"Did you hear—anything?" There was alarm in Eric's whisper. "I'll swear I heard somebody shout. Sounded like a woman!"

Both men kept still, quiveringly alert, but only the noise of the grazing oxen and the swish of a night bird reached their ears.

"Must be hearing things, Eric! A woman? Out in this country? And at night?" Cay turned to the fire. "Say, perhaps that's your fairy," he chafed good-naturedly.

Eric did not have time to answer. From somewhere out by Kutawa canyon a scream was heard.

The men stared at each other.

"A woman's voice—she's in trouble! Perhaps—" Eric walked a few paces down the clearing; listening intently for some further cry. A distant click of metal as it struck stone caught his ears. It was followed by the deep-sounding thuds of hoofs. A rider—coming this way; making for the light of the fire, flashed to Eric's mind. He ran to an open lane that led to the clearing. Peering through the darkness he suddenly made out a snow-white patch heading directly for him. He stood still. Feelings

of anxiety for the woman in trouble were overawed by a premonition of danger. A white-nosed, jet-black, saddled horse shot past him like a rocket; missing him by inches.

The excited animal circled the wagon twice before Cay caught the dragging lines. He led the beast to the light of the flames.

"Why!—there's blood!" Cay paled as he drew his hand down the white nose. "And—not a scratch, as far as I can see. It must be—" He held up a blood-smeared palm for inspection.

"And—it's a woman's pet," observed Eric, detecting a bow of faded ribbon on the bridle.

A repetition of the shrill cry interrupted the men's inspection. They were quiet for a few seconds. The animal tugged at Cay's grip; pricking its ears and prancing frantically. The young homesteader swung into the saddle. The animal reared, then bolted from the light of the fire straight into the darkness.

At first Eric allowed the creature its head, hoping that by some strange force he would be led to the girl or woman calling for help. Presently, the animal tired. Slowing to a lazy canter it appeared aimless in its direction. Then, realizing the seriousness of his mission, and recalling the piercing scream, Eric gripped the lines with new determination; striking off in a definite direction.

Stopping occasionally, he listened. Failing to catch any further outcry he became obsessed with a feeling of ominous danger. He checked his position from time to time by the glimmer of the camp-fire; now a mere pin point of orange in the black-

ness on the eastern slopes. Later, the dot of flame became undiscernable, and Eric longed for the first light of daybreak.

Just before dawn the wind veered from north to northwest. With it came a booming of a waterfall. Kutawa canyon, and the falls, reflected the homesteader. He recalled the report of a treacherous stream that defied and challenged all mankind. Simultaneously, as he heard the rapids, the saddlebeast turned and cantered toward them.

The animal had not gone far when suddenly it stopped short; throwing Eric to the ground. Although slightly shaken up he managed to keep a firm grip of the lines. He stood up.

Taking a step forward he was almost thrown to the ground again when the horse reared. In taking a quick step sideways to maintain his balance Eric's feet dislodged a large stone. It rolled down a rocky incline. There was silence, then a distinct thud as the boulder struck the bank of the Kutawa creek, eighty feet below.

Eric could not move. It seemed as if every muscle and nerve in his body had immediately contracted; gripping him in a vice of steel. He visualized himself and the horse on a rugged pinnacle, thousands of feet in the air. He felt that the slightest move on his part would cast them to death in rocky canyons far below.

Several more stones were dislodged. After a nerve-racking silence they struck the bank below; sending echoes from the walls of the gorge.

The shaking-up received when thrown, and the realization that he was standing on the brink of a

precipice weakened Eric. He felt the alternative of either reaching a place of safety and to rest, or to collapse from exhaustion. Stepping back a few feet he reached a large boulder. Allowing the horse as much slack line as possible, he dropped to the ground, burying his face in the crook of his arm in relaxation.

Soon the stars began to wane and the black in the east paled, while an opaque and obscure haze crept down from the distant range to the foothills and valleys below; lastly stealing into Kutawa canyon, filling hidden nooks and crannies with a soft, diffused light.

Presently, light, woolpack clouds, sailing in the eastern sky, became crimson and blood-tinged, telling the world that a new day, bright as a new penny, was falling from the mint of time.

## CHAPTER VII

### A FAIRY COMES TO LIFE

Floating on that blue, Utopian stream that carries its precious cargo of human freight between sleeping and waking moments, Eric suddenly found himself cast violently onto a desolate reef in mid-stream; the forceful palms of the swift and smooth current determined to thrust him clear across a narrow island of rocks.

Clawing the air impetuously with hands and arms, Eric opened his eyes to a scene of peace and radiance. He gazed wistfully from side to side. The saddle-beast, now loose and grazing a hundred yards away, shaking itself, and the short, sweet song of a meadowlark, helped to aline his puzzled thoughts.

Sitting erect he stretched his arms above his head. He smiled as he realized that a mystical experience had been nothing more than an impressive dream.

"Surely mystical and strange!" he mused. Closing his eyes he endeavoured to reconstruct, from a mass of everyday facts and chimerical details, some tangible form of continuity.

"A broad, magnificent highway—a stately church of Gothic architecture—" he described aloud. "Park Avenue, New York, and—Park Avenue church at 64th Street. Yes—Sunday evening—in

mid-winter. Hundreds of fashionably-dressed people listening to the carillon of bells. The tune is—yes—'Song of Songs.' Now the people are chanting quietly while the rich harmony of the bells is sent into the clear, frosty atmosphere. Then! A chariot of fire is sweeping out of a starry sky. Strange! And there in the distant sky, as if waiting for the chariot, is a gathering, an empyreal reception. And—yes, a stupendous banquet prepared! The chariot was sweeping toward *him*. Surely it must have been one like this that carried dear old Elijah to Heaven. Now to jump in as it sweeps past—then for that banquet!" Eric laughed aloud. "Just like a dream! Always wake up just at the glorious part."

Eric stood up. He was disappointed.

"Just going to step into that golden chariot, and—well, here I am far from anything that looks like a chariot; 'cept that white-nosed pony. And a banquet? Am I hungry? I've never been as hungry in all my life!"

Eric tried to dismiss all thought of the dream from his mind but the fantastic details returned with grim reality. The melody of the bells still sounded in his ears. Singing the tune that the carillon so persistently rang in his mind, he walked to the edge of the canyon.

He stopped as he thought he heard a moan.

"Strange! I *must* be hearing things!" From a happy, carefree spirit he had been suddenly shot into the uncanny spirit of the tragedy of the night.

Eric felt that he had little that was tangible on which to sense a tragedy—a scream in the night.



Although at first perturbed and prompted to action, his second thoughts somewhat relieved his high-mettled, resolute feelings. Probably some passing homesteaders having a joke. Perhaps a shriek that had frightened the horse. But the beast was saddled, he pondered. And the animal had blood on its nose! The piercing cry had certainly been a cry for help! Some person was in trouble! Eric refused to believe that the moan was fancy or emotion. Instinctively, he felt that some girl was in danger. He knew that unless he satisfied himself that no one *was* in peril he would be drawn back again to make another search.

In a vague way he felt that until he had discovered a plausible reason for the mysterious incident he would be haunted by a ghostly fear of failure in his chivalry. He industriously dug a hole in the ground with his heel while he pondered philosophically.

He surveyed the opposite wall of the canyon, scanning the rugged banks of the creek as far as possible. He tried to examine the near wall of the gorge, but a bulge in the face of the cliff obstructed his view of a section and an area of the bank directly beneath. He dropped to his hands and knees and looked over the edge. At a point twenty feet below, where twisted, stunted poplars struggled for a root-hold, he noticed a narrow, uneven ledge. Lying flat on his stomach he gave the natural shelf a thorough scrutiny. He gazed through the swaying curtain of leaves and branches that hid a portion of the ledge.

There was a distinct moan.

Eric still doubted his hearing. A slight rustling in the leaves below keyed him to action. Reaching over the precipitous edge, he saw the inert form of a girl—Valma.

His first impulse was to let himself down to the trees—to rescue the girl from her hazardous position. He quickly realized, however, that he would be unable to climb back to the top of the cliff. Jumping to his feet he looked round quickly; expecting to find help at arm's length. Observing a coil of rope tied to the saddle he cautiously approached the animal. Satisfied that the strength of the rope would support the girl he unfastened it and hurried back.

Making a noose that could be slipped over the girl's head, and down to her waist, he dropped to the ground. Reaching dangerously over the rim he threw the noose clear of the obstruction of branches and leaves. It dangled to within a few feet of the prostrate form.

"Hello!—Hello, there!—Girlie! Are you hurt much?" Stretching his arm he swung the rope nearer to the girl. "Slip that noose over your head, and down to your waist, and I'll pull you up."

Valma did not respond.

Eric felt beaten. He realized how helpless he was single-handed. He could ride to the camp and get his father. He immediately adjudged, however, that the slight delay might further jeopardize the girl's life. Feelings of grave apprehension obsessed him as he watched the still form. He hoped that some safe, speedy plan of rescue would come to his mind.

Valma was stretched face down on the narrow ledge. Her right arm was protruding perilously over the edge. Her left arm was doubled under her head. It appeared to Eric that the slightest move to the right on the girl's part would cast her headlong over the edge.

Eric changed his position slightly. He tried to see the girl's face. The wind swayed the leaves to one side. He saw her cheek. A red smear, extending from ear to chin caught his eyes.

The leaves swayed back. The sight was lost to his view.

## CHAPTER VIII

### EYES OF THE NIGHT

Eric studied the form of the girl. The cotton blouse was torn in several places; exposing her smooth, white shoulders. Patches of deep red on the dress told a story of further injury.

The girl's right arm moved!

Eric was horrified. He expected to see the helpless form slip from the narrow ledge; to fall to the river below. All the help in the world would be too late then! Feeling his utter helplessness, he was, however, prompted to immediate action.

Manoeuvring the rope, he succeeded in catching the noose over the girl's arm. He pulled gently to attract her attention.

Valma opened her eyes. She turned her head slightly.

"It's all right! Don't get frightened, Missy! Just keep still. Do just as I tell you. I'll have you up here in a jiffy."

Raising herself on her left arm she became aware of the rope on her right arm and endeavoured to throw it off.

"Don't get scared. I want to help you." He eased the rope.

She stared vacantly. Becoming conscious of her plight she was alarmed. She crouched back on the ledge. She moaned pitifully.

"Girlie! No need to be afraid. I've been looking for you all night. I came to help you!" Eric pulled the rope gently. "Put that noose over your head. Slip it down to your waist. I'll soon have you up here!"

Valma looked up. Not seeing anyone she gave her attention to the rope; trying to throw it off. She succeeded and squirmed still further back from where it dangled in mid-air. She feared its swinging approach as one would dread the strike of a deadly cobra.

"Say!—I'm not going to *hurt* you!" Eric emphasized.

"Then—you're *not* Darkness Jim? An'—*you're* not going to kill me?" Valma's words were weak, but firm and clear. She tried to catch sight of the homesteader.

Eric smiled.

"Darkness Jim? Not going to *kill* you?" He laughed aloud. "Never heard tell of the fellow, but if he's the bounder who hurt you—I'm going to find him quickly! And no, I'm *not* going to *kill* you!"

"An' you won't let Darkness Jim kill me? Or drive me out of Touchwood? Is that right, mister?" She sat up, holding on to a branch. "Mister, where's Peter? He's not hurt—is he?" There was anxiety in the girl's voice.

"Peter? You mean—your pony?"

"He's got a white patch on his nose."

"Don't worry about him. He's up here chewing his head off. Came and fetched me last night, and—why he saved my life! Yes, saved me from slid-

ing over this precipice by almost breaking my neck on the ground! Don't you worry about him. Just put this rope round your waist. I'll tell you everything when I get you up here."

"An'—you're *not* Darkness Jim? *Sure?* Honest-an'-truly?"

"Honest and truly! I'll even 'cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die' if you want me to."

With feeble motions Valma caught hold of the rope. She slipped it over her head and made it secure round her waist.

Eric instructed her to tighten it and to hold it firmly with both hands. With great care he pulled her up. As she reached the edge of the cliff he grasped her wrist and the rope together with one hand, then gripped her firmly round the shoulders. He lifted her safely to the top. She tried to stand up, but sagged unconscious to the ground.

She lay face down, her frail body inert, her hair a tousled mass.

Unfastening the rope, Eric turned the girl over; supporting her against a large boulder. Her face was ghastly white. Her expression was set in lines of horror and agony. He reasoned that there was not a moment to lose if the child was to be helped to recovery.

Returning to the edge of the gorge he searched for some way to get to the water. Observing a gradual slope about one hundred yards downstream he hurried to the water's edge. Taking off his windbreaker, he pushed it beneath the surface of the water; saturating it thoroughly. Clambering up the cliff he started along the rim of the canyon.

Skirting a high rock that hid sight of the child, Eric was suddenly arrested by a shrill call. In the brief, awed silence that followed, he regained his composure. Quickening his pace he rushed round the end of the rocks.

A man was racing toward the girl. He was about to pick her up when Eric, rushing up, clutched him by the shoulder.

Of splendid physique, with broad and powerful shoulders, well-developed muscles, the intruder stared at Eric with grave suspicion. The man observed the dripping garment in Eric's hand. Immediately, his expression changed to that of understanding. Stretching out his hands he made a motion to take the garment.

"Who the devil are you? What do you know about this?" Eric took a step forward. The intruder took Eric's hand gently from his shoulder. He started to gesture wildly; emitting a hoarse, chuckling laughter.

A moan aroused both men to the plight of the child.

Valma opened her eyes and looked up with a stare that was alarming; her eyes opening wider and wider until incredible white spaces showed above and below the staring pupils.

Her lips parted. She mumbled inaudibly.

The action prompted the intruder to utter a fierce, inarticulate chatter. He had read the child's lips frame his name.

"Dummy!" she repeated quietly.

Eric was nonplussed. He glanced from the man to the girl, then back to the man; seeking in his

expression some solution to his own puzzled thoughts. The wet garment in his hand reminded him of his intentions before the interruption. Dropping beside the girl he bathed her blood-smeared face, then placed a sleeve of the windbreaker across her forehead.

"You'll soon feel better, girlie," he comforted.

Eric tried to analyse the episode of the night and the strange and inexplicable impulse that had drawn him, first toward the canyon, then to the child. He believed in impulses. Somehow he felt that he was mortally bound to avenge the girl. This duty, or the fact that he had rendered assistance to the child, struck deep into his heart.

"Darkness Jim—an'—the wolf-dog!" The girl drew closer to Eric. "He's set on drivin' me from the ranges—an' his wolf-dog—always attacks me, 'cause he tells it to. He'll be comin' back—when it's dark, an'—"

"Never a sign of him! He's gone forever, Missy." Eric moved her slightly in an effort to make her more comfortable. "Never heard tell of the fellow. He won't be coming back," he assured.

"If you don't know him—you must be a new settler—a new homesteader. 'Long-sufferin' 'squatters, Pop calls them. But—it won't be long 'fore you hear 'bout him. He's set on drivin' all folks out, an' says all women-folks are she-devils. Says they're a-feared to die—an' so they don't know how to live."

Tears came to her eyes. She was quiet.

Presently, the figure of Dummy, pacing back and



forth along a clear stretch of prairie, gesturing to himself, caught her attention.

"Dummy—he knows! 'Though he's deaf an' dumb, he understands better than most folks."

Raising her hand she motioned to Dummy. He saw the summons. He hurried to her side. Taking her frail hand he watched her lips expectantly.

"Dummy, you won't let Darkness Jim hurt me? An' you won't let his wolf-dog—"

Eric did not wait for the girl to finish. He motioned to the man, then pointed to the saddle-beast. Picking the girl up he carried her to the animal.

With Dummy supporting the child in the saddle, Eric led the horse in the direction of his new home-site.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the range of hills to the north, a man, dishevelled and besmirched with blood, led by a massive wolf-hound on a heavy chain, groped hysterically through the poplars and birches and across the open stretches to the ridge of Touchwood Hills.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CALL OF THE WILD

To a normal mind the night was over, and with morning came breezes from the lowlands; filling the air with a fragrance of summer blossoms. Delicate threads of cirrus clouds, feathering the eastern and southern sky, took on a soft, roseate glow from the rising sun; imparting a crowning, majestic canopy to a scene of peace, beauty, and enchantment.

But to Darkness Jim, staggering through the bluffs and across the rock-strewn clearings to his cabin sanctuary in the hills, it was still a night of heinous ordeal. To him it was still the darkest hour before the dawn. To him the light breezes, telling of June flowers, came as winds of gale-force velocity; bending and twisting the monsters of the forest as if they were saplings, uprooting and casting the smaller trees and brush into swirling eddies with cyclonic violence. In his deranged mind, the delicate clouds changed miraculously to heavy masses of storm clouds; taking on the form of fortified mountains and turreted strongholds. From these fastnesses, vivid flashes of lightning and deafening broadsides of thunder raced with the giant peaks through the wind-seared darkness. It was a race, a challenge to overtake him ere he reach the shelter of his hermitage. A shadow, like some seismic phantom, danced persecutingly before

his eyes; making thoughts, words, and movements an indescribable heaviness.

Following the lead of the huge wolf-hound Darkness Jim reeled onward.

When within a hundred yards of the summit of the ridge he held the lead taut; supporting himself against a tree. His right hand went to his forehead. He ruffled his unkempt hair. His left arm dropped to his side. The animal stepped back a few paces. Seeking its master's hand it cupped its nose into the palm. The act brought the man from his hallucination. Looking down at the creature his gaze was returned in a strangely wistful manner; obliterating all thought of the gale winds and the thundering of an impending catastrophe. The animal licked the man's hand. The next second it began grinding its teeth against the links of the steel chain.

In the animal's action Darkness Jim read a plea for freedom. With a wearied effort he unfastened the chain. He patted the creature affectionately. The dog rejoiced in the caress. It jumped up, pawing its master's shoulder clumsily in gratitude.

The man admired the hound for its long, grayish haunches, and its strong, massive shoulders. Its mother had been a full-blooded wolf and its father four generations removed. Darkness Jim knew that in the wolf-hound, "Cassius," there was more wolf than dog. The ears, sharp, pointed, and tense, caught his attention and revived a memory of the dog's mother. She had deserted her three pups in her answer to the call of the pack. Two of the

pups died later, but Darkness Jim had found solace in devoting the extra care to Cassius.

But he was taking no chances of the son joining its mother in the outlaw pack. It was full-grown now. In its bark was a strange, wild, mournful note like a wolf howl. Its huge, steel-like jaws had a strength unbelievable. Darkness Jim had felt the sharp teeth, and when the wolf in the creature had tasted blood there had been a frenzied interrogation in its eyes.

Often in the long, ghostly hour before dawn he had watched the fast-growing pup strain at the leash as repeated wails had floated across the moon-swept hills and forests to his cabin. He recalled that each summons had been followed by a clanking of the chain, a low whining, and a grinding of teeth against the links. Not until the calls had faded into the distance, and the first streaks of light pierced the blackness of night had the creature been content to relax its efforts and pleas in its fight for freedom.

"Too much wolf—for mankind, Cassius. Yet not enough—not *enough* wolf for—" Darkness Jim, in a broken voice, hesitated; seeking a final dramatic word. "Not enough wolf for that persecuting pack! It would pounce upon you! Would fight you to the death! Would fight with savage instinct to tear these powerful shoulders! Would leap ferociously to rip your throat! Then—the pack would pass on, to leave you to bleed to death—an outcast among outcasts!"

His hand, still fondling the dog's strong, muscular neck, ran along the length of a crooked scar.

It recalled in his troubled mind the memory of a thrilling night—months ago—when the pack, trailing Cassius and seemingly claiming vengeance for some form of traitorism, had dotted the enshrouding curtain of blackness with countless pairs of flaming eyes—eyes that appeared like burning jewels set in a jet-black mantle stretched beyond his campfire. The frenzied scattering of the points of light as he had thrown a firebrand in their midst came back with startling reality. The thought of the grim test that came later, when two of the ring-leaders closed in and attacked Cassius, brought back thrilling moments fraught with demoniacal danger. On that occasion he had saved the dog's life. The carrying of the injured animal to his cabin, the stitching of the gapping wound in its neck, and nursing the creature back to health, had combined to make one of the exemplary periods of his whole life. He sensed that it had meant much to Cassius. He thought he read the understanding appreciation in the animal's eyes.

Now he silently appraised the creature's jaws. He had seen them gradually develop in the months that the dog had been a captive. "The pack *might* drive you out, beaten and bleeding," he modified, in awed, halting tone.

Darkness Jim realized that no ancestral ties bound the creature to the mastery of man, but instinctively, he sensed that during the hours of tragic darkness the animal needed his protection, and—instinctively—he knew that during the hours of daylight he could not fight his battles without the dog's assistance. Some strange complex of nature

had drawn man and animal together in mutual guardianship.

On one occasion only had a person approached within sight of his cabin. Cassius had leapt across the intervening distance to spring upon the intruder. The dog's action had pleased Darkness Jim, although he had corrected the animal later. It had been a test of courage and fidelity. It had proved its loyalty.

Moving slightly, he patted the dog's head. He attempted to mumble a few words of praise, but his parched throat and twitching lips failed him. Consciousness of his weakness worried his tortured brain. He sought strength in action.

"Cassius! They're following us! Trailing us to the end!" All his force and energy was necessary for audibility. "Cassius, they're trailing us, but—they'll never get us. But there's no turning back! We've got to go on and on!"

He leaned forward. He placed his arm round the animal's neck; receiving a spirited bunting of the creature's head in gratitude.

"You can *never* go back to the wolf pack, and I—can never go back—to the man pack. The man pack! He laughed ironically at the spontaneous analogy. "I can never go back. We've got to go on and on to the—beginning. That's it, Cassius! Not the end, but the beginning! The beginning of—" Breaking off abruptly he straightened himself. Heading toward the ridge he started up the slope; gazing from side to side in his fanatical excitement.

His ears caught the sound of the rapids and the

falls. His mind, craving action, immediately visualized the scene. Changing his direction he made his way across the ridge and down the opposite side toward a spot where the swift and placid waters first broke into a swirling challenge to mankind. Climbing a short, rocky mound he reached a natural ledge, six feet above the surface of the river.

The ledge was one of Darkness Jim's favorite retreats.

He never knew why; unless it was because the crashing and the booming of the rapids and the water-thunder, as the volume fell over a sheer drop of ninety feet, brought temporary relief to his mind. Here was a *reason* to sense noise and action of terrific force in his brain. Here was surely an antidote to throw off the power of a force that made normal thought a mental impossibility. Yet beneath a dogmatic spirit of bravado he was afraid of himself while on the ledge. Perhaps it was this underlying fear that gave the place the strange fascination that drew him back again and again. Thousands of eyes that stared accusingly from the turbulent water searched through to hidden depths of his soul. Thousands of dripping-wet talons, reaching out of the seething cauldron of fury, beckoned him on in a spirit of challenge.

An uncanny feeling of weakness came over him.

He turned away. He tried to shut out the illusion, only to be faced with an army of eerie beings that spurred him on to accept the challenge. He laughed sardonically at his increasing frailty. He sought solace in dropping to his knees and drawing

Cassius, gazing down curiously at the gurgling edge of water, closer to him.

"Cassius! They say that no man can swim these rapids, and—live to tell the story. But they're wrong! They say it's death to the man who attempts it. An end for all time to the man who tries it. They speak of death as something to be feared instead of it being the greatest adventure in life! And by fearing death they brand themselves as cowards. They are defeated before the battle commences. Some day, Cassius . . ." He waved assurance to the rapids. "Some day we will show them . . . show them that *not* to fear is to win. We'll win the victory before we start!"

Darkness Jim hesitated as he felt a tremor of great fear creep into his mind. He knew that it would produce fatigue, languor, and destructive weakness. He recollected, in a vague way that men and wolves on the trail of himself and Cassius would aggravate a weakness born of fear, and the battle *would* be lost before it was declared; despite his conviction that he, and Cassius, feared neither battle nor death. It seemed to him that some strange force was constantly taunting him with the thought that the spirit of bravado with which he inwardly fought his weakness was nothing but a sham veneer.

The test must come; as well now as later.

The next second Darkness Jim jumped from the ledge to disappear beneath the surface of the water. An added whirlpool marked his struggle in the deepest and most treacherous part of the river.



## CHAPTER X

### CASSIUS PLAYS HIS PART

A few seconds later, Darkness Jim appeared above the surface several yards downstream. Striking out bravely he started for the opposite bank.

Cassius pranced nervously, whining piteously. Observing its master making good headway the creature prepared to leap into the water. An instant later it hesitated. Leaving the ledge it raced back and forth along the shore; craning its head and neck in anticipation of its master's return. But the sea of whitecaps and the frothing spray shut out all view of Darkness Jim to Cassius on the shore line. Racing back to the ledge the animal searched the rapids for a sign of its master.

Half-way across, drifting dangerously downstream, Darkness Jim glanced back long enough to catch sight of the animal. Waving his arm, he shouted to the dog; urging the creature to follow.

At sound of his voice, Cassius turned quickly. A second later the wolf-hound leapt into the stream.

With Darkness Jim it was now a weakening struggle for life against the surging torrent. At first he had felt confident that with his unconquerable spirit he could easily reach the opposite side, but although he struggled with what seemed superhuman effort he was fast losing ground. He became fully conscious of the fact that strong and swift

undercurrents were impeding him to a greater degree than his efforts were forcing him to the bank. The surface water, splashing and gurgling about his head, made breathing a difficult and conscious task; sorely taxing his impoverished strength.

In one way Darkness Jim welcomed the singing of the water as it bubbled and frothed about his ears and face. It blotted out all thought of the gale winds and persecuting darkness of night in his mind; bringing temporary solace and renewed energy in the mental relief.

Midstream, his hand and arm struck the furry side of Cassius. He turned his attention and efforts from fighting the waters to urge the animal shoreward. In doing so, he failed to observe the rapids directly ahead; telling of a shallowness and a reef of treacherous, hidden rocks. One protruding boulder grazed his shins unmercifully. Another tripped him; throwing him headlong beneath the surface. The current caught him broadside; sweeping him on at an alarming rate.

Cassius saw its master sink. It treaded water; waiting for him to reappear, but the animal lost much ground. Instinctively, it knew that it was being carried dangerously near the brink of the falls.

An arm shot above the surface. Simultaneously, Cassius felt itself against the body of its master. The creature saw the uplifted arm and immediately struggled sideways. It forced its body beneath the arm. Man and dog sank from view.

In a placid pool that told of a threatening whirlpool both reappeared. The man instantly realized

the animal's plight. Freeing the wolf-hound he struck out for the shore, while Cassius swam alongside; seemingly in readiness to render further help.

The powerful, gripping rapids, and the seething, boiling current, increased in strength and fury toward the falls; now perilously near.

Darkness Jim and Cassius shortened the distance between themselves and the shore, but they were being rapidly carried on to where the river dropped from sight.

With the thundering of the waters increasing with each stroke, Darkness Jim knew that it was now a fight against time as well as against distance. Disregarding the impending doom, he concentrated on reaching his goal. He felt that to weaken now was to admit defeat.

"Cassius!—we will win!" Except for the name, the words were lost in feeble effort.

Man and dog struggled on, fighting the rapids aside and ahead. They slowly gained in their race to the bank.

When within ten feet of the shore a swift and smooth sweep of water caught them in its full force, casting them onto a reef. Darkness Jim found himself kneeling on the rocks, holding his head above the surface by bracing his arms on the hidden boulders. He knew that now it was only a matter of seconds before he would be beaten; collapsing from weakness to succumb helplessly to the fury of the falls.

Cassius struggled across the intervening few feet and reached the bank. Shaking itself feebly, it started to whine piteously. The creature was

prompted to swim back to the side of its master, but the swiftness of the current and the dangerously close proximity of the falls discouraged it.

Darkness Jim, arms still braced against the torrent, was making a last game fight for life. From all appearances he was beaten. The brink of the falls, the roaring of which now ironically mocked the man's spirit of bravado, was but a few yards beyond the smooth stretch ahead. Showers of fine spray wafted to his face as his eyes remained fixed on that last line of surface where the river fantastically and mysteriously dropped from sight.

His whole body was trembling now. Tears, welling up in his eyes, mingled with the tiny globules of thunder spray; blotting out a tragic picture of stern realities with a curtain of soft, grey mist. It was as if some spirit of mercy, helpless in the indomitability of the challenge, stood ready to lessen the stigma of crushing defeat. To offer some token of esteem in alleviation of the inevitable doom.

"Cass—ius! Where's Cassius? God—help—Cassius!"

Through the tear-spray curtain of mist the man glanced to his right and saw a blurred vision of a trembling shore-line. He thought he saw an object prancing excitedly.

"God—help—Cassius!"

Sensing the appeal in the man's eyes and the framing of his lips in calling its name, Cassius leapt across the few feet separating it from its master. It swam beyond him and then, headed for the shore, forced its way beneath its master's arms. It threw its head up and licked his face.

"Cassius! God *did* help you!" There was a note of jubilation, hope, and courage in the man's voice as he felt the animal's body thrust against his own. His arms relaxed from their bracing posture. He clutched the animal. In the swirl of whirlpool and spray the creature started swimming back to the shore, while Darkness Jim, one arm round the animal, struggled alongside in an effort to support himself. His feet touched the rocks of the river-bed. Taking a step forward, and partly being drawn out of the stream by Cassius, Darkness Jim reached the bank.

"We've won—Cassius! We've won—the fight —" The moaning trailed off to a broken whisper.

The dog endeavoured to draw its master still further onto the bank by tugging at his torn clothes. Receiving no response or assistance the creature dropped exhausted.

An hour later Darkness Jim staggered to his feet. Cassius jumped to action as it observed its master recover. The man threw his arms about the animal; mumbling words of gratitude.

They made their way up the bank and along the shore at a slow pace; resting every few moments. They reached a wide part of the river far above the falls and rapids where numerous rocks made it easy to cross the stream. Reaching the opposite side, man and dog turned downstream until they came to the ledge where they had entered the rapids.

"It's all over now, Cassius! We're victors of the rapids that have made cowards of them all! The world's all wrong, Cassius, and we're right!

*That* for your challenge!" He shook a trembling fist in bold defiance as he turned from the ledge.

Eyes bloodshot, haggard, and with his ragged garments dripping, Darkness Jim clutched a tree for support, while the wolf-hound panted at his feet. After an interval, they started up the slope. Crossing two small ridges and making their way through the dense undergrowth they reached a clearing at one side of which was a dilapidated log cabin.

Forcing the door with his shoulder Darkness Jim staggered inside. Picking up a battered dipper from the floor he thrust it into a pail of water. Drinking deeply he suddenly observed, over the brim of the dipper, that the door was open. He rushed to close it; securing it with a heavy bar of iron.

"They're outwitted, Cassius! They won't get us, now!" He spoke in a spirit of confidence as he groped across the uneven floor. "We're alone now. Alone in our victory. Alone to review all the hells of life, and the devil of fear, and you? You can thank the wolf Gods, and all the other Gods—if there are any—that you saved my life, or else—" He laughed hysterically as he dropped to a low bench by the barricaded window.

The next second he was lost in sleep.

## CHAPTER XI

### GOD STAKES A HOMESTEAD

When Eric failed to return Cay was perturbed for his safety. When there was no call or sign, telling of his son's whereabouts the homesteader was worried. The meal of beans and bacon that he had prepared was placed to one side.

Seated by the fire he smoked his pipe fitfully.

Throughout the night he had circled the camp; nervously scanning the countryside; stopping occasionally to listen for a guiding call.

Once, when Cay had struck out farther from the clearing and had been momentarily shut off from the light of the fire, he became nervous in the pitch blackness. He wondered how Eric would be able to find his way back unless he had some signal or beacon as a guide.

Cay returned to the tent. Securing the lighted lantern and an axe he hurried to the nearest bluff in search of a tree that would serve as a beacon staff. Selecting a poplar he chopped it down and trimmed it. Fastening the lantern to one end, he raised it, securing the lower end to the wagon wheel with rope. The light shone brightly twenty feet above the ground. Cay appraised its guiding value from time to time; peering into the night, expecting to see or hear some immediate return for his initiative. Every little while he built up the fire to a

spirited blaze; praying that it would guide his son safely home.

At the first light of day the homesteader, weary and haggard, packed food to take on his search for Eric. He hardly knew which direction to take, but presumed that if he set out toward what had been described to him as Kutawa canyon he would in all probability meet a settler or a rancher who could help him.

At every clearing Cay took advantage of the highest ground to survey the countryside; now growing brighter with the strengthening daylight.

Standing on a large rock in one of the open stretches that commanded a view of many hills and intervening valleys, he suddenly saw the head of a horse appear over a slope some two hundred yards away.

At the same instant, Peter observed the man. The animal turned its head quickly.

The sharp pull on the rein aroused Eric. A neigh from the creature prompted him to follow its gaze. Seeing his father he waved a greeting.

Cay sooner reached the party; tired and worn by the night of tragic adventure. Eric held some coffee to the girl's lips. Dummy accepted a drink and nodded in keen appreciation. Eric then took a drink. A few moments later the party continued toward the camp.

Reaching the tent Eric carried Valma to one of the cots. He bathed and dressed her wounds. Covering her up he left her. He wondered about her parents and her relatives, or friends, who must be deeply anxious and worried about her. He felt



that they must be searching for her. He felt relieved, however, in the knowledge that Dummy knew the girl and that he would see that she reached her home safely and as quickly as possible.

Dummy, holding the bridle of Peter, gazed at the camp and its equipment. He studied the face of Cay, and then nodded determinedly. He had made an important decision.

Watering and tethering the horse, he changed the tether of the lead ox. Picking up a pail he returned a few minutes later with spring water.

Throughout the morning Cay slept. Eric divided his time between watching over the girl and unpacking supplies, while Dummy worked about the camp as if his very existence depended on its orderliness and store of necessities. Making several trips to nearby bluffs, by early afternoon he had collected many dry willow roots, and had stacked a large number of dry poplars in a sheltered place. Changing the location of the fire to a more favorable spot, he erected a wind-break, and dug a fire-guard around it. Later, he motioned to Eric in a request to use the shotgun. He made a trip to a slough, returning with several wild ducks.

The girl slept fitfully until late afternoon. Once in a while she would start violently; crying out that she saw Darkness Jim crouching down to attack her. Toward evening she grew more agitated, and when darkness came she was delirious. At midnight Cay took up the vigil while Eric and Dummy slept.

The night passed without further misadventure.

Eric was up early the next morning to relieve his father at the side of the girl. She woke weak but

quiet and rational. He talked to her earnestly, but was careful not to mention incidents of the preceding night. He wanted to force the memory of Darkness Jim and the wolf-hound out of her mind by other interests. He reasoned that it was imperative if she were to recover quickly. For a while he tried to entertain her with some magazines, but she remained depressed.

Eric hardly knew what to do. Infinite patience and tactful understanding might bring the child out of the oppression long enough to give nature a chance. He felt unequal to the task. But the impossible or the unattainable had always fascinated him; urging him on courageously. And impending defeat angered him on to extreme effort. Except for a few superficial wounds the girl was not injured seriously. Eric diagnosed her condition as a mental shock, and prescribed accordingly. He resolved to be as tactful as a woman; as patient as a saint; and as skilful as a year in medical college had equipped him. Anything and everything to remove the obsession from the girl's mind.

"Suppose I'll have to give myself up as a bad job!" He spoke dejectedly, trusting to appeal to a woman's love of salvation.

But, woman-like she caught his declaration in a totally different spirit.

"Give yourself up?" She sat up and stared. "Sounds like you have been rustlin' cattle, or doin' something powerful wrong! You're not—an outlaw? Or—you're *sure* you're not Darkness Jim?" She clutched at the bed covering and squirmed away nervously.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I meant, give myself up because I cannot seem to help you. And—*me* an outlaw!" he laughed. "The joke's on me!"

By late afternoon the girl had recovered sufficiently to get up and to sit by the fire. Eric joined her. Noticing a brightness in her eyes and a less strained expression he felt a slight touch of pride in his nursing ability.

"Now, do you understand?" he asked quietly. "Do you understand that we all want to help you to be happy, and feel free from all harm? And to get you back to your home as quickly as possible!" He placed his hand on the child's arm.

"Yes—I'll be better soon." A note of pathos was in her voice. "But I didn't want to come here—to this place!"

"But girlie, you needed help. Remember, I pulled you up from that dangerous—"

"Wisht you had let me stay there!" she interrupted, tears coming to her eyes. "I always want to be happy, and I try so hard, but when that—"

"But I did help you. Surely you owe me—something?"

She looked at Eric.

"I *owe* you—something? I don't jes' understand. Do you mean—I owe you—some money for helpin' me?"

Eric was amused. He smiled.

"No, no! I didn't mean that! You could never repay me enough for saving such a *valuable* life. That is, if I *did* save your life. No, I mean you owe me just a little thought. A little gratitude. Perhaps just, 'thank you.'"

"I don't see any *thanks* in 'thank you,' but I'm much obliged 'cause maybe you scared 'Darkness Jim away. I don't ever want to see him again, or his wolf-dog. If I do, I'll wisht you had never found me, an' helped me!" She buried her face in her arms.

Eric was silent for a few seconds. He recalled that he was trying to force the memory of the tragic night from the girl's mind, but the subject had been brought up without a protest. He was a little conscious-stricken for speaking of helping the child. He was about to tell her how he had nursed the fawn back to recovery, of the animal's apparent joy at receiving its freedom, when she raised her head and continued:

"*You* never met Darkness Jim—or else you would want to—die, an' wouldn't care much!" She warmed her hands at the fire; staring through the flames into distance. "No homesteader—or anybody ever saw him. Not even a long ways off, an' folks don't worry none 'bout him. They call him a good feller, an' say that he will make a prosperous settler some day, but they don't know what they're sayin'. They don't know anything 'bout his wolf-hound." She dried her eyes on the palms of her hands. "'Naw, he's a fine feller that's not quite right in his head!' That's what they say. Pop says that too, but he's never seen him like I have. Darkness Jim only comes down from the ridge, an' goes 'bout on dark nights, an' never in the daytime. That's why folks call him Darkness Jim. Some folks once said that he was one of those college fellers, an' was powerful scared of the mounties.

Said they were a-trailin' him for somethin'. Then they would laugh an' say he would be a fine feller soon, but they don't know, an'—"

Eric's mind was preoccupied; now humorously, then dreamily, and again thoughtfully.

"Not so crazy after all," he interrupted, lighting a cigarette. "Sane enough to keep under cover during the day. Perhaps he *will* turn out to be a prosperous farmer or rancher. There is a possibility. But forget the whole affair, girlie!"

"But Darkness Jim has never scared them like he has me! They ain't never been caught in his big, strong arms, with his wolf-dog a-jumpin' up an' tryin' to tear them to pieces! They have never been followed by him in the darkness—an' caught, an' beaten!" The child buried her face on her arms again.

Eric moved nearer. He placed his arm round her shoulders. He appealed to her to forget that the man and the dog ever existed. He tried to assure her that she would never be harmed or frightened again. He spoke of her saddle-beast and how much he admired her for taking such great care of the pet. But except for a faint smile of appreciation she was quiet and unaffected.

Eric left the girl for a moment. Entering the tent he looked round for something to interest her. Picking up a box of odds and ends he returned. Sitting beside her he tried to change her thoughts. He told her about the various trinkets, but beyond a cursory glance she failed to display interest. He handed her a small mirror. He hoped to appeal to her vanity.

"You know—you have beautiful, long, glossy hair. So different nowadays when all the girls have caught on to the short hair craze. Here, comb it out, it's all tangled." He handed her a comb.

"No—it's all right," she replied without affectation.

"Then, I'm going to do it for you!"

Eric was rather surprised to find the girl passive when he had expected resistance. Combing out the tangles the mass of auburn hair brightened in a wavy stream of gold.

The homesteader did not think how singular his action might appear to an onlooker. He became so absorbed that he failed to notice the approach of two cowboys. One, slightly under the average height, was dark, swarthy, happy and smiling. The other, giant of a man, was slender, erect, lantern-jawed, but solemn and dour. Both men were striking in their respective characteristics; both striking in comparison. The giant left an indelible impression. An impression that held, fascinated, and inspired serious thought. He was typically a thinker, a dreamer, a philosopher, a poet, and a power wherever he appeared. The swarthy cowboy was the giant's antithesis. Jovial, constantly smiling, quick, alert of humor, he gave one the impression of happy friendship. His face told of a carefree, sunny disposition; of an ability to bound over difficulties with cheerful song.

The two proceeded across the open stretch toward Cay's homestead. The giant, looking far ahead, was in deep thought. The other, singing merrily

and swinging his body, checked his bear-like walk to a suggestion of rhythm.

*"Every puncher—like a l'le lo-o-vin',  
To a cowboy—lovin'—uhm—simply gran'.  
But to tough, old bachelor, son-of-a-gun—  
No good a-tall.  
'Cause nobode-e-e—loves Columbus Shipman;  
'Cept buckskin, Siwashe-e pony-e-e!"*

"Ha! ha, what say you to that? Columbus! Hum! Columbus discovered America—why don't you, his namesake, try to discover some love?" He slapped his companion on the back to emphasize the suggestion.

Shipman caught sight of Eric and the girl seated at the fire. He held out his arm, commanding silence and a halt. The swarthy cowboy followed his friend's gaze. His chubby face beamed at the sight of the couple.

"Who said that God himself hadn't staked a homestead?" The tall cowboy's voice was slow, definite, and impressive.

"He sure picked one near home! Why—'tis next door to Heaven! An'—there's a perfect l'le angel!" answered the short cowpuncher. "An'—there's a he-angel too!" he added quickly, as Eric turned at the sound of voices.

The girl's face was hidden beneath the shining mass of hair. As the men approached she shook her face clear of the tresses and stood up with Eric to greet the visitors.

## CHAPTER XII

### FIRESIDE DISCLOSURES

"Beggin' your pardon, folks," hailed the short cowboy, extending a hard, stocky hand to Eric, "but you sure must be a lady's man, an' a feller after my own hide an' hoof. I allus wanted to raise Shipman, this partner of mine, to be a lady's man, but the pesky steer is a resistin' critter, an' while he ain't no woman hater, he's pre-jew-dished somewhat. He's been that way since my horse pistol was raised from a colt. Beg pardon again, folks, his given name is Columbus, but his brand, from range to range, is jest 'S-K-Y.' No bars, no circles, nor half-circles, nor zig-zags. Jest the natural brand to suit the distance. Got tall that way from sleepin' on a stretcher, so they say. 'Though I says he got reckless an' went an' took one of them extension courses.'"

Eric winced slightly as the cowboy increased the firmness of his hand grip.

"Say, what's *your* brand?" he continued. "Mine's Ninga. Sounds kind of queer to regular folks, but punchers ain't folks, an' certainly ain't regular! And the lady—what's her name?"

Eric hesitated. He had not asked the girl her name. The situation was a little embarrassing. It was amusing.



"Yes—what is your name?" he turned to the girl.  
"Mine's Eric—Eric Pryor."

"Valma."

"Miss Valma, I'm sure glad to meet you," drawled Shipman, taking off his broad-brimmed hat, and reaching down to clasp her hand. "And you too, Mr. Eric," he added as he gripped the homesteader's hand even more firmly than had Ninga. "Meetin' new folks is just like findin' a magazine, or fannin' it on a pesky, outlaw bronc to a new town—a feller doesn't know what he's goin' to larn next. Every time I meet strangers I git to know somethin' new. There has been times when sech knowledge was not so mighty good for a growin' youngster. More times than that it was better. I figure if I'd hit the dust afore this I would have missed a herd of larning."

There was more impression in Sky's words than Ninga had felt for a long time. He tried in vain to hide feelings of admiration. Gradually his features displayed pride of partnership and corroboration of the giant's deeper thoughts. Ninga had always held a profound respect for the big-hearted cowboy; inwardly he sensed that from the companionship he assimilated a contentment that helped him to perform his daily tasks in a happy, carefree spirit.

In the meantime, Cay and Dummy were busy, cutting and stacking firewood in a nearby bluff.

A quick motion, and a lisping of Dummy, prompted Cay to pause in his chopping of branches. Dummy had been hauling poplars and had stopped suddenly as he became aware of the presence of

strangers. The aged homesteader heard the deep voice of Sky. Following Dummy's gaze he tried to peer through the trees and underbrush, but the foliage was too dense, and the distance too great to get a clear view of the group. Dummy glanced at Cay. Reading the expression that asked for assurance he nodded that Dummy was right. The man dropped the poles he was hauling, and went through a pantomime of shaking hands and greeting imaginary friends.

"You're right, but danged if I know how you understand!" remarked Cay. "Perhaps some new settlers, like ourselves," he ventured, hopefully.

The two walked through the bluff and across the clearing to where the girl and the men were talking.

"Hello, Dummy," Valma's eyes narrowed in a smile of welcome. "Thought you was a-goin' to stack kindlin' all day?"

"My name's Ninga," the short cowboy greeted affably, holding out his hand to Dummy. "What's your handle?"

Valma was quick to enjoy the joke. She smiled.

"He doesn't understand *you*!" she explained. "He's deaf—an' dumb—an' doesn't even know one word from another—no more'n a cow! That's why we call him Dummy. Wait—" The girl took a step nearer to Dummy. With lightning rapidity she put her fingers through seeming contortions. The man's eyes gleamed happily as he caught the words. He replied in decided, thorough movements. He shook hands with the newcomers.

"Ha!—A right good one on me," laughed Ninga. "This dummy talk must be lots of fun, an' easy

'nough if a feller gits his brain workin', an' fingers, an' arms all at once. Must be a warm 'nough job on round-up days, an' all through the summer. Lots of fun we'll be havin' with Dummy an' his funny finger an' hand talkin'."

Cay shook hands with the visitors, extending to them an invitation to stay for supper. Valma and Dummy assisted in preparing the meal. Eric chatted with the cowboys.

Seated on logs round the campfire that evening they told their stories.

Ninga and Sky, tiring of a nomadic life on the western ranges, had compromised and had hitched their saddle-beasts to a buckboard; heading east in search of a "quiet and settled existence." The send-off party at the ranch was still vivid in the memory of Ninga who had sworn before a "happiness" committee to consider it a sacred duty to foster matrimonial instincts in one Columbus Shipman. In reciprocation the giant puncher had vowed to suppress his companion's weakness for a retinue of fair, dark, and red-haired admirers.

"Steady there! Whoa! Hold on, Nin!" interrupted Sky as the short cowboy concluded a brief summary of the farewell party. "You're like the tenderfoot that cut off the dog's tail, and clean forgot 'bout the front quarters—the business end. Guess he's runnin' yet. The tenderfoot I mean. Remember, Nin? Now, go steady-like. Git the worst over first. Bitter medicine always goes afore barley sugar. Yessir! Now tell the folks what roped you to settle down like a civilized farmer with weeny calves and garden truck, and—afore

long you must git the wife and fam'ly up!" Sky kept a straight face; successfully hiding his merriment.

"Naw! That's wastin' rope!" retorted Ninga, rolling a cigarette. He dismissed the challenge. He had acquired a smattering of philosophy from his companion and took great pride in applying it whenever the slightest opportunity presented. "Columbus ne'er did like those beef trips ever since he almost got hog-tied an' thrown by a dame in that same Chicago city. Been pre-jew-dished ever since!" He lit the cigarette.

"Go on now," urged Sky. "Folks a-waitin' to hear 'bout that trip to Chicago, when you got roped for life with a prize in the matrimony corral. Go on—we're waitin'!"

"Nothin' to it!" emphasized Ninga, drawing his end of the log nearer to the fire. "But if you want to hear 'bout the barley sugar, an' the time when 'Dame Good-Luck' touched me on the shoulder, an' you don't wish me to clatter up my talk none with what Sky calls 'bitter medicine,' then—here she goes! Ride 'em cowboy! But—lookin' *back* at them days, an' not at them in the face, is sure—barley sugar, Mr. Sky Columbus Shipman!" Taking a deep breath and flicking the ash from his cigarette, Ninga started off in histrionic manner.

"Behold! In me you see a puncher that had the 'igh honor, an' the dis-tinction to ride for the 'Double Cross' ranch for a pair of summers! In me you see a puncher as cattle-wise as a cow's mother. An' alas!—in me you see the travellin',

world-trottin', an' buckin', puncher what acted as chambermaid to one of them excursions for steers to Chicago city twice!" The cowboy threw out his chest; emphasizing his self-esteem pride. Placing his upturned thumbs at his armpits he scanned the faces of his listeners for unanimous approval.

"Well, partners? What proclaims the assembly of capable an' wind-sound judges?" he pleaded. "Are you—proud for me to continue?" His attempt to maintain an attitude of dignity was fast weakening; smiles breaking through the assumed stern mask.

"Can you—ride a hoss better'n 'white mule?'" drawled Sky, sarcastically. "Yessir! Proceed! You may be as larned as a cow's great-grandmother, but git notorious, 'specially 'bout the time when that white mule lick bucked you into the lap of matrimony! Proceed, Brother Calamity!"

Ignoring the insinuation, Ninga continued:

"Me an' 'Champ' Shrimpton were a-chaperonin' them steers for nigh on a couple of weeks afore we gits 'em receipted. Then I sets off at a steady lope all alone to see life as lived 'mong civilized outlaws.

"I travels along the main street, quiet-like, an' 'bout noon I meets a new partner. After a while he takes me to see some of them tall buildings, close-like. I differs with him 'bout whether them tallest ones would stand a nor'wester. Don't figure he cared nohow, 'cause while I looked up a-tryin' to count the windows of one of them, this partner clears off, hide an' hoof. Later I found he had rustled my month's pay an' my train ticket." Ninga

dropped his cigarette. He leaned down and fumbled in the grass.

"What did you drop? Your false teeth?" asked Sky.

## CHAPTER XIII

### WHEN HIGH COURAGE CALLS

"Whoa!—By thundas!—Then the stampede got to started!" continued Ninga. "I meets another partner. I have 'nough change to lope with him to a she-bootlegger for three rounds; weeny drinks, but as kickin' as that brute 'Dynamite Red.' For 'bout three days, an' a pair of nights I lose all sense of respectable direction. I gits mixed up in a taxicab race with shootin' irons, an' a regular street battle on Michigan main street down by t' lake. Whoa!—ride 'em cowboy! Fire-a-plenty! Excuse me! I thinks mebbe I should have brought my prize six-shooter, an' mebbe my brandin' irons, an' when three beer saloons gits shot up I thinks It's time for me to canter back to git some peaceful rest out at Dave's place, where two 'shoot-ups' per day is the limit.

"Holy crackener! I gits back to where I started at the stockyards, feelin' kind-of-shaky, an' empty-like. I was for wishin' I was back to the Double Cross for some chuck, when 'long comes a dame. She was doin' a slow lope, an' reckon she would weigh 'bout—couple of hundred on t' hoof—dressed. She looks at me with her eyes, an' I walks away—thinkin' how it was one of them women like Champ Shrimpton told me 'bout when holdin' my month's pay an' nowheres to go."

Ninga stood up. Walking to the water pail he took a long drink from the tin dipper.

"Well—this dame! She says: 'Say—hayseed! Ere you one of them puncher fellers all lickered up with white mule?' I'm wishin' I was back somewheres with Champ for further guidance, an' back at the Double Cross for mostly chuck. 'Lady, oh, lady!' says I, tryin' to appear polite-like, 'what you see afore you is only t' remnants—of a mis-spent puncher,' I tells her, still staggerin' first northwest, an' then southeast; under the 'fluence of that white jackass. That green licker ne'er did hit my innards right side up. Then I ran clean out of advice, an' talk for sech occasions."

Ninga re-lighted the stub of his cigarette.

"By thundas! Do you know what that dame did?" He gazed along the row of faces. "She takes the part of 'Dame Good-luck'! She acts like a—honest-to-goodness partner. Yessir! She ropes me, an' feeds me, an' then leads me to her home so that I can git rested. Jest like you would a weeny calf, one of them l'le fellers when it loses its ma. Then she goes an' rustles a train ticket for me to git back to the jumpin'-off place for the Double Cross ranch. Afore she stampedes me to the day coach she tells me how lonesome she is to go a-farmin' with a puncher feller, an' requests me to hit the trail back soon an' to pack my month's pay in my shirt, an' no licker.

"That's 'bout all, 'cept that next round-up Lex Denoy sets me off again to Chicago, an' I takes the dame to one of them—'sky-pilots.' She's been



tellin' me to git a farm an' what she calls a 'go-buggy' and for me to be a law-abidin' folk."

He took off his hat and drew his hand across his forehead.

"My apology to present company, Miss Valma," excused Sky, in his only comment, "but the Gods are drunk sometimes—they put the brains of a man into the head of a woman."

Throughout Ninga's narrative the assembly had been appreciative. Of the listeners, Dummy had been the most occupied. He had divided his attention between the speaker and the girl, first watching the man's eyes and expression intently, then nodding and smiling with Valma as she interpreted on her fingers the context of the story.

The girl caught a quiet hissing sound. Looking at Dummy she followed his fingers as they ran off a flow of words.

"Ha—Dummy! You sure do want me to go school teachin', an'—remember, I've never been to school myself," she exclaimed aloud.

She turned to Ninga.

"Dummy—he likes your story an' he says it's lot of fun," explained Valma. "An' he says he's pleased you met the lady, an' that she roped you, 'cause now we can get a school started. He's always tellin' me to be a school-marm."

"School-marm? *We* git a school started?" Ninga was puzzled. He looked at Sky for enlightenment.

"That's a bright idea, too!" agreed Sky. "Let me figure some. Think you must have 'bout twelve weeny fellers to start a school? And—Ninga?"

He's made a fair 'nough start. Has two sets of twin fellers! Yessir!" There was amusement in his eyes as he turned toward Valma. "Yessir! Found a pair on each side of a gooseberry bush!"

"My ambition is for ten," surprised Ninga, proudly. "Mind you, *not* ten pairs! Naw, but ten fine puncher boys, ridin' two by two! T' pride of the ranges—the apple of the eye of Sky Columbus Shipman, bachelor, that would be a-bringin' up the rear!"

Sky suggested that Valma tell something of her life on the ranges, but she was reticent. By questioning, however, she said that she had lived at Pine Needle as long as she could remember. That she had only known the companionship of one woman, Snowflake, in all her life. The only friendship of men she had ever shared was that of those who had either worked or called at the ranch.

"And—you've never—seen another little girl or a *white* woman, like yourself?" Sky expressed surprise. He could not understand that there was a woman, or a girl, who had never looked upon another girl or woman. He wondered how it felt. It seemed impossible. He tried to fathom the mind of a person whose life had been denied the most natural experience in the world. Supposing *he* had never set eyes upon another man? He tried to picture the first meeting between two such men. After a few seconds he shook his head doubtfully. It was beyond all imagination; unnatural to the point of defying comprehension.

"Course I've seen plenty of squaws—Indian girls, an' some half-breed girls an' women down on

'Poor Man' and 'Day Star' reserves. But one of these days I'll go to town—an' see other girls like myself, an' women, an' perhaps a train," she predicted happily.

"But—what 'bout your—mother? Did you—never have any brothers and sisters?" queried Sky, still unable to believe what he had heard.

"Snowflake—she's jest *like* a mother," answered Valma, with a marked touch of affection. "I don't remember anybody else so kind, an' understandin' to me—jest like I think God wanted a mother to be. An' I never had any—brothers, an' sisters, like you talk 'bout. Jest got my father. When I ask who my mother was, an' anythin' else, he says that I'm his girl, an' that's all that matters. Says it won't be any different even when I grow up."

Although the men continued to question Valma they were unable to get further information regarding her life. She volunteered to tell the life history of Peter, and was anxious to relate details of a great love and friendship of a hermit thrush, but of herself, and of her days spent on the ranges she was silent.

There was a lull in the chatting as Dummy built up the fire. He stamped on some smoking embers that had been flung from the fire.

Sky took up the conversation: "Ever since I was a l'le feller, no bigger'n a calf, I've heard tell of a glorious rainbow that's got its brightest end somewheres 'mong these hills. That was a long time ago. I was just a shaver, but I always told myself that some day I would git busy, find the rainbow, and dig for that pot of gold, like I had been told

'bout. And—yessir! Guess the gold is there—somewheres! I figure we all got to be partners, together-like. We've got to pack low 'till the gold comes a-fannin' it to our top bunks. Sure 'nough it will come on round-up days, and bring prosperity to all us partners," was his philosophical summation.

Repeated yawns from Ninga prompted Sky to declare that they would return to their temporary camp beside the Telegraph trail. Both men had filed on quarter sections and expected to locate them beyond Kutawa falls the following day. They thanked the homesteaders for the hospitality, and promised to return soon.

The cowboys were about to turn from the gathering and to head across the clearing, when Dummy started to sniff the air in a peculiar manner. His usual expression, excessively studious and observing, immediately gave way to one of confusion and alarm. He gazed inquiringly at the faces of the men, then at the fire; the blaze of which now leapt and roared under the stimulus of a re-fuelling of willow roots. Marking the direction of the wind from its action on the flames, it appeared as if the information offered a possible clue to a solution of the man's puzzlement. He turned toward Kutawa canyon. The next instant, he had left the circle, and was walking across the encampment to the opening lane of prairie. He stopped abruptly as he reached the rise of land that extended across the clearing. Peering into the blackness on the opposite side, he thrust his head forward, and then moved from side to side as his eyes searched the prairie ahead.

The girl and the men were dumbfounded. With a presentiment of danger they stood as if rooted to the ground; their eyes directed to the form of Dummy, broad-shouldered, erect, illuminated brightly in the firelight against the background of darkness. They saw his head drop forward. They saw him turn from side to side. They were perplexed.

Dummy's keen sense of smell suddenly caught the strong, pungent odor of perspiring cattle as it came on a dust-laden breath of wind. Suddenly, his whole frame was tense under the mental and nervous strain. He realized a great, impending danger. He stood rigid in readiness for action.

He was not deaf now. He could hear that awesome, thundering from the hoofs of thousands of infuriated cattle as they galloped like mad fiends across the prairie; tearing down everything in their pathway, leaving in their wake a wide swath of destruction, disaster, and death. He could hear the sickening clashing of horns as the steers struck against one another in the constantly crowding herd. He could hear it as distinctly as if the animals were within fifty feet of him. The pitiful bleatings and the bellowings of the calves and cows came to him as they would to normal ears.

An instant later, he caught sight of hundreds of pairs of eyes, gleaming a rich amber brilliance, charging toward the opening; making direct for the camp clearing. The sight nerved him to immediate action, but yet he felt unable to move; totally incapable of turning to shout a warning of the calamity. A vivid picture of seeing himself being

pounded to death beneath the murderous hoofs fired him to superhuman energy.

Almost simultaneously, as Dummy sighted the sea of eyes as they caught and reflected the radiance of the campfire, Sky and Ninga heard the thundering of hoofs. They knew the great danger; the warning recalling many thrilling and narrow escapes from being trampled to death. Sky ran across the clearing. He planned to divert the leaders of the on-rush from the camp. He stopped as he saw Dummy turn and rush toward him.

With face ghastly white, his eyes bulging, Dummy plainly showed the horror of what he had seen.

"Quick! For God's sake! A stampede!" he gasped with perfect pronunciation.

"Dummy!—You're talkin'!" screamed Valma, unable to control her amazement.

## CHAPTER XIV

### PETER PLAYS HIS PART

The act of Dummy speaking, in correctly-pronounced words and in a well-modulated voice, was a distinct shock. The girl and the men were alarmed. They were almost panic-stricken at the man's actions and warning. But the import of his outcry was momentarily lost in mixed feelings of amazement and jubilation at hearing him talk.

Valma could not take her eyes from him. She was in deep thought. Tears of gladness moistened her eyes as she realized that her prayers had been answered. She rejoiced in the knowledge that her supplications, on behalf of this handsome, fearless, understanding, and God-loving man—for him to be given his voice and hearing—had been answered triumphantly.

Dummy's great and deep faith, that one day his voice and hearing would be given to him, had also been rewarded. Valma had fought harder than anyone would ever know to inspire this faith in the man; succeeding, she had constantly fought to develop it to the utmost degree of strength in his mind.

Dummy tried to speak again. The words would not come. There was nothing but an outburst of inarticulate chatter. Dejected and depressed he immediately resorted to the artificial language on

his fingers; giving grave attention to an explanation of the sight he had seen over the rim of the clearing.

Valma, sensing the sacred glory and graciousness of the miracle, and then experiencing its passing in a flash, was heart-broken. She had felt exalted to the skies, and then as swiftly cast down to the depths of despair. But in a second she was joyous again. She was happy in the conviction that the few spoken words were striking evidence that one day—perhaps very soon—Dummy would be able to speak and hear like a normal person. She motioned her fingers through a new message. She urged him to cherish even greater hopes than heretofore—to strengthen his faith in this power of a great and understanding spirit.

In just such a manner as the impending disaster of the stampeding animals had been for the moment obliterated to give full vent to the astonishment of Dummy's voice, the miraculous incident was as quickly forgotten as all minds were accelerated to action. The conscious presence of Dummy was swept to oblivion as all were suddenly electrified to fight in an effort to stem the onrushing herds of frenzied cattle in their charge of destruction and tragedy.

Sky picked up Eric's gun. He rushed toward the rim of the clearing. He shouted to the other men to arm themselves with a weapon of some kind—to join him at once! Ninga, taking Cay's revolver, hurried to the side of the tall cowpuncher, while Eric, Cay, and Dummy, each armed with a huge stick, took up positions in the opening of the clearing so as to form a human barrier.



"Don't be a-feared of them!" encouraged Sky, trying hard to keep calm. "They might try to git through, but rush, leap, and shout for all you're worth. Aim to head the critters through the bluffs on the south. If any git through, I'll drop them in their tracks, and you, Ninga, do the same. And—careful, boys, watch, and be ready to break for safety if they crowd in on us. And—hold them back from that north side. If they ever git through on the right of us, they'll join up with the left body, and—stampede in on us! So—stand pat for your lives on that north side, boys; otherwise it will be Kingdom Come for all of us!"

The thundering of hoofs, the snapping and breaking of twigs, branches, and trees as the terrified herds charged madly on, struck awe into the fighters. The clashing of horns against horns, the weird bellowing of the panic-stricken creatures becoming louder each second, told of a monstrosity of power in a wave of devastation that was sweeping and crushing everything before it. To the men, pale and horrified, yet courageous and steadfast, the very earth seemed to tremble beneath the impact of the myriad hoofs. The men visualized, for a flashing second, the mighty trees of the forests being razed to the ground in the wake of demolishment. They saw themselves, held by some strange, hynotic spell to gaze into the sea of gleaming eyes, as helpless Lilliputian puppets pitted against a leviathan force as yet undreamt of in the ken of mankind.

Meanwhile, Valma hasily strengthened the tether on the lead ox of the Pryor team, lest the animal should break away and join the stampede. Picking

up a blazing willow pole from the fire she quickly unfastened the halter rope of Peter from the wagon seat and jumped on the unsaddled pony. Holding the flaming firebrand at arm's length, she rode to where the men stood in readiness to repel the first charge of the leaders of the fear-haunted army.

Suddenly, Sky fired both barrels of the gun into the air as the massive head and shoulders of an enormous bull appeared in the light of the flare that Valma waved.

The magnificent creature, its eyes flaring fury, its huge, snorting, red nostrils quivering in excitement, hesitated, and then, urged on by the surging herd of followers now careering up the incline, it gazed frantically from side to side, undecided for the second which way to charge.

Led by Sky, the men, yelling vehemently, waving their weapons threateningly, attempted to head the leader to the south. Leaping to its side the giant cowboy spread out his arms as if he would pit his physical strength against that of the creature's.

Valma, riding with only the aid of a halter shank, suddenly directed Peter daringly in front of the bull. Wheeling abruptly, she raced on toward the southern bluffs; meanwhile swinging the flaming pole to gain the attention of the animal. The girl's action gave the creature a decision. Further infuriated by the sight of the horse, it dropped its head, displaying long and perfectly-formed horns; spelling death to the antagonist that lost to the attack. Pawing the turf in its madness, it suddenly shot like a bolt in the tracks of the horse and rider.

The men stood aghast. Horror-stricken and ter-

rified, they were hardly quick enough to follow the swift action of the tragedy being enacted. It seemed to them that the charging bull would gore the pony with tremendous force; sending child and animal to a ghastly death. Nothing but a miracle could save the girl. Ninga fired straight at the leader's head. Simultaneously, Peter, failing to clear a fallen log, went to the ground, throwing Valma into a thicket. As she went to the ground she relaxed her grip of the burning willow. It fell with a spirited blaze between the fallen horse and the charging monster; sending up a shower of sparks and white-hot embers. The flames ignited a patch of dry grass directly in front of the bull. The second and third shots from Ninga's revolver struck the animal on the jaw. The sharp sting of the bullets and the fire in its pathway bewildered the creature anew; prompting it to hesitate. Sky, quickly reading the leader's action, seized the opportunity. In one leap he threw himself against the beast; shrieking a weird, awesome cry. The next instant, the bull turned abruptly from Peter and Valma to continue its rampage through the trees and bushes to the south.

The horse regained its feet and straightway stood prancing at the bushes from which Valma was emerging. It appeared as if the animal sensed the impending danger; standing ready to protect and to aid the girl.

Valma struck her pony on the flank in an effort to force it to gallop to safety. She rushed back to the men. Peter galloped a few yards into the darkness, then circled and cantered back to the wagon.

The men continued in their frantic efforts to swerve the first line of the cattle from the clearing into the tracks of the leader, but wildly excited, and with heads low, the huge beasts came charging on with terrifying madness; straight toward them.

Yelling demoniacally, shooting over the heads of the cattle and waving weapons violently, was of absolutely no avail in retarding the progress or diverging the direction of the furious onrush. The vast herd, crushing and trampling beneath their flying hoofs those of their number that weakened and fell, crowded closer together and surged on; each one eagerly welcoming the meagre space that the dropping out of one or two afforded; the gap filling up with lightning rapidity. Like some mighty army suddenly possessed of a fiend incarnate the fear-crazed animals raced over the struggling carcasses of their unfortunates; impatient at being held up for a brief second, further infuriated at being prodded from behind by their own kind in the urge to keep up the killing pace in the maniacal effort to escape from the imaginary demon of the night.

## CHAPTER XV

### WHEN THE SPIRIT GUARDS

The bellowing of the herds, the countless pairs of eyes, and the sickening clashing of horns, grew so close that it seemed that the next instant the men and the girl would be submerged by the sea of cattle; the whole campsite engulfed in the inundation of destruction and catastrophe.

It appeared as if the greatest efforts of a super-genius to turn the titanic wave of disaster would be utterly futile.

"Back to the wagon! All of you!" shouted Sky, stepping forward a few paces to cover the retreat of the men and the girl.

He had hardly spoken when he suddenly observed part of the first line break away and head for the north side of the camp. Others were fast following the lead, adding to the column that threatened to sweep across the encampment, and later to crowd back to link up with the columns streaming along the south edge. The center body, between the two advance lines, was now coursing madly up the incline. Any second now they would top the rim where the men first fought to drive the horde back.

The men and the girl retreated. Dummy, realizing that the cattle were breaking through on the north side in alarming numbers, rushed back in a northerly direction in a last minute attempt to stem

the tide from further advance, but immediately realized the futility of his efforts. He saw a gross folly, an even greater danger in such an endeavour, as there was a possibility of the north column suddenly verging and stampeding directly across the clearing, in doing so to cut off the men's immediate avenue of escape. They would be trapped unmercifully in a closing circle of crowding animals from which there would be no salvation.

Dummy looked around for Valma. Seeing her standing near the wagon holding Peter he motioned to her to take off the halter shank and to give the animal its freedom; adding a secondary motion that otherwise there was danger of the horse being caught among the cattle. He then hurriedly released the tethered ox.

Valma carried out the man's suggestion. She turned Peter toward the east. Unsnapping the length of rope, she gave the pony a blow on the flank. The creature did not make a move to leave her. After a second strike with the rope it cantered away for a short distance; undecided whether to return to the camp or to gallop to the open prairie. Later, it disappeared into the darkness.

Dummy rushed back to Valma. He motioned to her to climb into the wagon. He started to drag the logs from the side of the fire to erect a barricade. Eric and Cay joined him, working frantically to place the logs against the wheels of the vehicle. Sky and Ninga, now retreating, were still hopeful of directing the onrush from the vicinity of the campsite.

The logs were hastily set in position to ward off

the attack of the herd, should the cowboys' last efforts prove futile. Dummy glanced around. He was about to motion to Cay and Eric to pull up the tent pegs and to stow the tent into the wagon when a shout of warning from Sky caused all to look up in alarm.

The punchers were racing back. Sky was waving excitedly to the group at the wagon to rush to the open prairie to the east, but he quickly saw that the north stream of cattle had already crossed over beyond the wagon to join up with the south stream. They were closing in on the whole campsite. There was no escape in any direction whatsoever.

Turning abruptly, the cowboys rushed to the wagon and climbed in. Reloading the firearms, the men stood ready to make their last fight for salvation.

Over the rim of the clearing came the thundering mass; charging on through all obstacles, numbers falling exhausted to be trampled and gored the next instant. Like a gigantic tidal wave engulfing everything in its sweep, the thousands of beasts, the white patches of their hides showing up vividly in the clouds of dust, forged on with amazing speed; on the verge of reducing to ruin, the camp equipment and supplies, and to lay waste the entire home-site.

A vivid flash of lightning suddenly lit up the scene as bright as day; adding in a terrifying manner to the horror of the tragedy. The flood of light showed the sea of infuriated monsters now racing toward the wagon; the lightning and the rumbling of thunder magnifying the fears of the demon from

which the creatures speeded to escape. The flash came as a signal for still greater effort to crush all before them in the haste to get as far away as possible from the gripping fingers of the fiend that fought to ensnarl them in its grip of destruction. The frantic shouting of the men and the firing of the guns, appeared as a harmless modicum in comparison with the impending spirit of disaster that spurred them on and on with increasing alarm.

A second streak of lightning, brighter than the first, played on the whole countryside; vivifying all objects with a surprising intensity.

"Look!—look!" screamed Valma, clutching Dummy's arm, and pointing into the darkness beyond the charging herds. The girl was in the wagon between Dummy and Eric. With a large stick across her shoulder, she stood ready to fight alongside the men. In the brief glare of light she had observed the figure of a man as he stood on the top of a hill at the back of the cattle.

She heard a wild, weird wolf-cry.

"Darkness Jim!" she shrieked, the sight of the man immediately bringing back the multitude of fears and horrors that the man held for her. "It's his work—to drive out the homesteaders!" she added. Her voice told of great nervousness and alarm.

The men looked up quickly, but the flash had passed, leaving the night blacker by the comparison. The firelight, between them and where Valma had caught sight of the man, shut out any possible vision beyond its rioting blaze.

The infuriated animals surged on, demolishing



the tent in the first attack; passing over the structure, the cots, boxes of provisions, clothing, and other articles, as if they were but scraps of paper in the pathway of a cyclone. Two beasts stumbled over the *débris*. They were instantly lost to sight as cattle in the rear clambered over them, and raced on; the sound of the breaking of legs, smashing of furniture and equipment being drowned in the pounding of hoofs and in the ear-piercing bellowing of the frenzied beasts.

Rushing on toward the fire, a few of the foremost creatures hesitated; those whose pathway led them directly into the blaze. They were crowded forward before they had time to seek an avenue of escape; carried on by the flood-tide of riot that knew no changing of course or stemming of current. As the monsters were forced to the rim of the fire-zone the first few leapt clear, but others, unable to take the brief respite to spring, were swept into the flames and white-hot embers. As their hoofs struck the fire they emitted a cry that was awesome and terrifying. The next instant, as the burning willows seared their hides and scorched their flesh, they plunged in mighty leaps toward the nearest trees and bushes. They roared their agony, pain and fears to the skies in a fervent appeal for salvation from the catastrophe that had struck its first blow.

The cries of the stricken creatures and the nauseating odor of burning hair and flesh brought tears to the eyes of the men. Sky and Ninga were sick at heart. Years on the ranges had taught them that the admirable monsters, now racing through fire and forest to their destruction, could be almost

as human as the most intelligent animal if cared for with patient understanding.

These men were of a type that had learned to understand cattle. Circumstances, or desires, or perhaps a mingling of both, had destined that they spend the greater part of their lives in tending the animals. They had become obsessed of a comradeship with the herds. It was their life's work to care for the beasts; to guard them from harm, injury, ravaging by wolves, and anything that had a tendency to go against them in reaching the highest standards of excellence. In the men's waking moments and throughout the long days on the prairie, the first law of the land, to think of their cattle and saddle-beasts before anything and everything, even before self, was forever in their minds; becoming, after a while, an unconscious and much-prized characteristic.

Now these same men were required to stand by and shoot and cut and slash these admired creatures. Now these same men were forced to welcome the stumbling of one or the other, knowing that the trampled creatures meant a slowing up of the advancing army for a few seconds. On second thoughts, they might have found slight consolation in the fact that by sacrificing a few of the beasts the greater number would be saved. But at such a time, second thoughts, or even clear, first thoughts, are beyond the angle and square of human logic.

The fire was immediately extinguished as the animals reached its rim; the flames trampled, the embers pounded into the prairie.

With the fire blotted out, the light that the girl

and the men had counted on to help them was gone. They felt the urgent need of the blaze to assist them to turn the tide of the onrush, as well as to give them light to defend their island of refuge. With the fire out, making the night darker, and the infuriated beasts charging madly across the center of the clearing, the fighters intuitively felt that it was now a matter of seconds before the barricade of logs and the wagon would be struck by the tremendous force of the stampede. Only a miracle could possibly save the barricade and the vehicle from a similar fate of the tent and its equipment. The logs would go crashing to the ground, the wagon would capsize at the first impact; throwing the occupants to the prairie, sprawling them to the mercy of the thousands of hoofs.

Another flash of lightning flooded the clearing with light as bright as day. Several of the animals, plunging blindly ahead, reached the logs. There was a sickening thud as the beasts collided against one another in furious commotion; the force of the impacts shaking the wagon violently, threatening to overturn it the next second.

Sky fired point blank at a monster of a steer that was charging toward the middle of the wagon. The blow of the beast at the most vital part of the wagon would certainly smash and split the half-inch boarding to pieces; despite the iron bracing. The animal's weight, propelled with tremendous force and fury, beneath the siding, would probably lift the vehicle clear off its wheels and capsize it.

Sky's shot struck the steer in time to avoid the immediate disaster.

Aided by the flash of lightning the cowboy's aim was good. The beast went down headlong, sprawling its huge frame alongside the wagon, blocking the space between the front and rear wheels; making a temporary barrier for the cattle whose passageway took them directly toward the vehicle.

A second monster, immediately on the heels of the first, followed up the charge. Once again Sky shot quickly and truly. The animal plunged forward, then dropped across the inert form of its leader.

In the meantime, Ninga continued to fire the revolver wildly into the air in an effort to rout the main body of the stampede from the wagon. Cay, Dummy, Eric, and Valma continued to strike the sides with their sticks, adding to the noise of the firing and shouting.

The next second, the full force of the attack struck across the clearing; trampling to complete destruction everything in its pathway. Crashing into the wagon, it tilted it at a forty-five degree angle, and then forced it along the ground several feet before it came to rest. It creaked and split under the terrific strain; threatening every second to be completely demolished.

Dummy was the first to act when the climax came. Realizing that the capsizing of the wagon was inevitable, he grasped Valma firmly about the waist. Jumping from the end of the tilting vehicle he landed square on the back of a large steer as it swept past. The animal reared and plunged, crowding those ahead with still greater fury; driving its wide-spreading horns cruelly from side to

side in a maddened effort to force an avenue of escape. As if suddenly singled out of the mass for the evil designs of a demoniacal specter, even more heinous than the arch-fiend that was careering the legion to destruction, the beast bucked and pitched in an attempt to throw the awesome thing that clung to its back. Dummy, adept at riding steers and outlaw horses, dug his knees tighter and tighter into the creature's sides with every new plunge; taking good care to hold his feet clear of the monsters that bunted and charged against the animal he was astride.

The wagon was being tilted on its end. Some unseen Goliath was picking up the vehicle as a child would a toy. A flash of lightning showed Eric and Cay holding on to the sideboards of the wagon as it started to overturn. Sky and Ninga were preparing to jump onto the cattle racing beneath them. Valma saw the sight and screamed; further terrorizing the beast that Dummy was riding.

There was a deafening and sickening crash, a pounding of hoofs, tearing and smashing to pieces the boarding and wheels that once had been a wagon. A cry of help reached Valma's ears. A shriek of agony, telling of the tragedy of the trapped men, pierced the air.

Hearing the pitiful cry, Valma screamed again. She clutched Dummy still tighter. The next instant she lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A SAGA OF THE NIGHT

From the wreck of the wagon and the demolition of the camp clearing, straight into the blackness of the night shot the terror-stricken army; stampeding through thick underbush, across dried-up swamplands, along the shore-lines of deep sloughs, careering wildly in their revolt against their foes, constantly closing in and charging to destroy everything and anything that barred their passage.

Dummy, his arm encircling the limp form of Valma, and clinging to the back of the monster steer, was fast feeling the fatigue of the strenuous ride. Keeping a firm grip of the girl, and being required to carry her dead weight was quickly sapping his remaining strength and energy, while the blows from trees and branches, rained upon him as the beast charged with the main army through the forests, called for super-human ability and supernatural resistance.

In his fast-recording impressions, Dummy felt sure that the cattle would soon tire and spread out fanwise, and then he would grasp the first opportunity to jump clear to the open prairie. He hoped that the creature he was riding would charge near the edge of one of the many sloughs; thereby giving him a chance to escape in the freedom of the waters. One impression was deeply engrossed on

Dummy's mind: the imperative and immediate need of getting from his hazardous position, safely to the ground before sheer exhaustion and fatigue caused him to slip down between the crowding and crushing horde.

The army now headed down an incline and toward a dense forest of giants that loomed up like a sky-high barrier. In a faint flash of lightning Dummy saw the towering wall of tamarack, pine and spruce. He knew the valley. It was one of the most heavily wooded in all the Touchwoods, being known as "Black Forest"; in many sections almost impenetrable, always dark, even on the brightest of days.

Dummy knew that the cattle would be swept and thrust into the dense foliage and thick timber with many casualties; spelling the end of the stampede. He dreaded the thought, however, of more blows about his head and shoulders, and the wrenching of his knees and legs as the creature charged through spaces almost too narrow for a clear passage. Yet he knew that despite all his efforts the beast would plunge blindly ahead, in face of all obstacles, until it either got through or collapsed.

With the same thundering of hoofs and ferocious bellowing that had marked the charge across the camp clearing, the herd streamed into the barrier of trees and undergrowth; snapping and breaking sapplings and young trees alike under the concerted force of impact. Dozens of the foremost beasts went down with the first crash of timber, to be quickly clambered over by those that followed; others veering off to the sides to escape from the

new terror of the night; thereby bringing about the first break-up of the stampede.

Dummy's steer followed those that headed straight into the heart of the forest. Ploughing through willow bushes and between slender poplars, the animal soon reached the drooping branches of the spruce and spreading boughs of the pine; that whipped and slashed the man's head and shoulders, despite his caution in bending as low as possible over the creature's back. Forgetting himself, he tried constantly to shield Valma against the constant punishment.

The steer charged on furiously. Presently, following several smaller beasts, it attempted to pass between two pines. The passageway was too narrow for the huge frame, and although one of the trees eased slightly, the creature was trapped. It came to a sudden stop. The impact threw the man against one of the trees, dazing him for an instant. He quickly recovered. Standing on the steer's back and reaching a low bough, he crooked his free arm over it. Placing his legs around the trunk he was free from the animal.

Dummy at once realized that he could not hold on for more than a few moments at the best. His bruised and aching muscles were so far spent that they ceased to function normally. It was only by the continual forcing back of his fast-ebbing strength, and a grim determination, that prevented him from dropping to the ground.

His day's work at the Pryor homesite, the fight at the rim of the clearing, the battle at the wagon, and the strenuous ride, had sapped every atom of



usefulness of his muscles. In addition to the wild ride on the steer's back, he had been required to keep a firm grip of the girl, and to suffer punishment from the many blows, while riding through the bluffs.

The animal that Dummy had ridden, released from the foe that clutched at its back and sides, struggled free. Bellowing, it raced on to join the main body of the stampede.

Dummy hoped and prayed that the cattle, still charging past, would soon thin out; otherwise his falling to the ground would be to meet death by being gored and trampled upon. Every few seconds it seemed as if the tree would be broken off at the base under the impact of the violent blows as the creatures forced their way through the narrow space. As the tree took up the shocks it jerked violently; calling for renewed and ever-increasing effort on Dummy's part to hold on.

Dummy tried to peer through the darkness, hoping to find that the end of the stampeding monsters was in sight, but as far as his eyes could see, countless streams of frenzied beasts were rampaging in his direction, and then passing on to be lost to sight in the depths of the forest.

Dummy's heart sank heavily as he felt himself about to fall; through sheer exhaustion, revolting physical pain, and burning torture, directly into the pathway of the terrorized animals. All of the gratifying sensations—assurance, courage, elation, and confidence—that he had experienced through his safe deliverance to the present moment, and the

exhilaration through achievement in grasping Valma from a perilous position, suddenly gave way to feelings of abject hopelessness, heart-breaking despair, and fear-gripping distress. The triumph that he had gloried in, although facing a ghastly death, was, in time measured by a finger-snap, swept aside. In recapitulation it loomed up as an ill-starred accomplishment that was fast terminating in a catastrophe.

Simultaneously, as Dummy changed his position slightly as he made ready to half slide, and to half drop to the ground, Valma gave a faint scream. She reached out at once, hugging him tightly about the shoulders. She opened her eyes. Sensing her hazardous position, she intuitively reached up and caught hold of the bough. She encircled her arms around the limb; relieving Dummy of her weight.

The recovery of the girl electrified the man to new and spirited action. Gripping the tree still firmer he struggled up several inches and then placed both arms round the tree just above the junction of the branch.

The cattle raced on beneath where Dummy and Valma were perched. The creatures bunted against the tree with what seemed still greater force. There was now a still greater peril of the man and the girl being dislodged. Presently the horde thinned out to double and single columns. The sound of their hoofs, the awesome bellowing, and the breaking of underbrush became less intense. Gradually the noises trailed off into the depths; telling that the main body of the stampede had passed; the strag-

glers, the maimed, and the broken, bringing up the rear in pitiful procession.

A few seconds later Dummy clutched Valma round the waist. He lowered her safely to the ground and then eased himself down the trunk.

## CHAPTER XVII

### ONCE TO EVERY MAN

Bleeding from several cuts and scratches, bruised and aching in all his joints and muscles, Dummy set to work immediately to comfort Valma as much as possible under the circumstances. Clearing a space, he groped about and gathered some wood. Within a few moments he had built a fire. Telling Valma in his finger language that he would be back soon he left in search of water to quench their thirst, to allay their perched and burning throats; inflamed painfully by the irritation of the dust-laden atmosphere and the sessions of riotous shouting.

When he returned, his cupped hands brimming over with clear, crystal water, he found Valma curled up on a grassy patch near the fire. She was apparently asleep.

Dummy's first impulse was to give a quiet salutation call that she knew by heart. But he suddenly checked himself. He gazed at her through the deep blue smoke of the burning willows. He took a step nearer and then stood still, like a man in a dream; beholding the beauty and charm of the girl.

For the first time in his life Dummy felt a strangeness creep over him. He could not, it seemed, and did not try to analyse his emotions, but rather glorified in the strangeness taking obses-

sion. He did, however, attempt to analyse why he had not realized before this morning that in this sunny-natured companion there was a beautiful being stepping across the threshold that separates innocent and carefree childhood from understanding and loving womanhood.

When Dummy had first arrived at Pine Needle, several months ago, Valma had impressed him as being a happy child of nature, but as the days slipped into weeks he soon began to sense an influence that her friendship—shared by all alike—was having over him. He was conscious of the girl's wistful charm, her understanding sympathy, her magnetism; at all times indelibly pronounced through her simplicity of purpose and expression.

Early in his days at the ranch he had begun to look for her upon his return from the ranges. In this he had not been alone, as all of the riders anxiously looked forward to Valma's greeting. They regarded the child's sincere and whole-hearted friendship as the brightest spot in the long and crowded days of activity.

But Valma had always been a *child*. A mere youngster whom one would feel prompted to hug and pet with brotherly love, to cherish with fatherly affection.

And furthermore, it is what Dummy's training and the prairie had done for him. He had been taught to be a big brother to all mankind. Not that he was superior in intellect, mentality, or emotions. Never a thought of this in the make-up of men whose vocation and careers had been brought to bear upon this tuition. His was to be a life of

service, and so far, he had lived up to the principles that had been implanted in him and entrusted to him. Caring for settlers who needed care. That was the first text in his crimson manual. In bold, black-face type it stood out, with an emphasis that everyone—no matter what creed, race, or color—who needed help and care; his was the duty to give that assistance, even though in the undertaking his own safety and life be imperilled. So he had come to the prairies to put his training into practice; at the same time to uphold the laws that had been made by man in the best interests of all mankind.

But now?

He turned away and gazed at the dark shadows that lurked in the depths of the forest, and then looked up through the leafy branches. His eyes caught sight of a star as it appeared for just a second between the racing storm clouds. Then he saw the child Valma, happy with her companions on God's Five Acres. In an instant, the sight of the "constant trio," Flight-Commander Gander, the lamb, Blacky, and King, the donkey, was before his eyes. He smiled as recollections of the true Valma came back; sweeping the strangeness from his thoughts.

He turned again to look at the child.

Her cotton dress had been torn and neatly patched in a dozen different places, but now there was a new tear at the shoulder, exposing her shapely neck and part of her gently-rounded bosom. The breathing motion of the girl's breast caught and held his attention.

Dummy could not take his eyes from the beauty

of this child who had suddenly blossomed forth, with countless sublime charms, to beautiful womanhood. Her wavy, auburn hair, reflecting the dancing flames of the fire, held his gaze with its mass of rich color; the smooth, natural tinting of the girl's face, striking against the black of her eyelashes and the brightness of her lips, appeared to take on a deeper glow from the red of the embers; her neck, white and clear and soft; the symmetrical curves of her bosom giving a final touch to harmonious and perfect beauty. His eyes followed her form down to her slender and well-shaped ankles, then back to her face and bosom.

The enchantment of the girl was further enhanced by knowledge of her sunny disposition and her happy spirit; even in the face of sorrow, disappointment, and misfortune. It seemed impossible that there could be this perfect combination of beauty in appearance, beauty and pureness of mind, and inspiring magnetism of personality. The girl's outward charm had always won attention and admiration, but when one learned of the wealth of character, richness of happy-co-operation to help others, and simplicity of purpose and expression, there had always been greater emphasis to the admiration, and an earnest hope to be forever included in the girl's circle of friendship.

There had been plenty of disappointments, privations, and sorrows in the few years of the child's life. But from the girl one would never hear of them. With each new trial had come greater strength of character of the many virtues; a more forceful and clearer understanding of what life

really is. Each misfortune had been a test of a particular virtue; then full justification for its existence.

No wonder everyone loved Valma. But all loved her as a *child*.

But some day—Dummy was sad at the thought—somebody would love the woman in the girl, then everything would be different.

The Touchwoods without Valma? There could be no such place *without* her. The Touchwoods without the child would be just plain hills, and valleys, lakes and streams—just so much scenery!

Pine Needle without its *spirit*? A smile came to Dummy's face as the absurdity of the thought flashed to him. No God's Five Acres? No pets? No singing? No welcome back to the ranch after a hard day's riding on the ranges?

But one day, despite all protests, the child, now stepping into womanhood, would be required to choose. Dummy felt sure the day would come, and perhaps come soon. And then—just a memory. When that time came he would go away—as far away as possible—from the Touchwoods. He was depressed as he allowed his thoughts to run their course.

Valma moved. Sitting up slowly she glanced round nervously. Observing Dummy, his cupped hands holding what remained of the water, she started.

"Dummy! What's wrong?" She forgot for the instant that he could not hear her voice.

Standing up she took a few steps toward him.



She repeated the question on her fingers; trying to pierce his stern, set features.

Dummy changed his expression of despair to one of servitor. Attempting to smile he dropped his head slightly. He motioned with his eyes to the water; slowly dripping away between his tightly-clenched hands.

Valma accepted the drink. She stood back. She searched the man's face for an answer to her thoughts.

"I don't understand, Dummy? You look—strange! You look worried!" she ran from her fingers. "Your face—it is cut—and bleeding! Are you hurt? Tell me, Dummy!" She took hold of his arm in her pleading.

She looked into his eyes.

Dummy broke away. Turning toward the fire he started to stamp it out. He now felt the full force of the woman in the child. He was fighting his emotions bravely, yet felt a weakening.

Valma was still bewildered. She grasped him with both hands. She turned so that she could look straight into his eyes.

He knew that to look directly at her would be to submit to his feelings. To give full vent to the pent-up emotions that were driving him on. Emotions that told him to take this girl, this beautiful new woman, into his arms, to hold her close to him, to acclaim her as his own.

He turned and faced her, but looked over her head. He freed his arms and hands: "Let us go—back to Pine Needle. Flight-Commander, King,

and Blacky, and—everyone at Pine Needle, loves you, and needs you,” his fingers suggested.

“That may be right, Dummy, but right now there are others that need us both *much* more,” was the quick reply. “Let’s get going back to Eric’s at once, because we have been away a long, long time.”

The girl and the man started immediately from the depths of the forest; along the pathway left by the stampeding cattle and on toward Pryor clearing.

Valma was not given to analysis. She accepted things with the unspoilt faith and curiosity of a child, but as she walked beside Dummy she kept wondering what could have come between them to mystify their friendship and understanding, while the man, unhappy at his failure to spare the girl the sight that was to meet them at the clearing, strolled along in deep thoughts of the queer ways of life—and love.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE STORM PASSES

As Dummy and Valma walked between the trees of the Black Forest in the direction of the Pryor campsite, there was just sufficient of the diffused light of the breaking of dawn to guide them along the track of ravage and calamity left by the stampeding cattle. The shafts of light, seeping through the dark green, spear-pointed pines, lofty and spreading in their canopy, gradually increased in brightness as the girl and man picked their way over the broken saplings, and round the beds of underbrush that had been trodden into the soft, carpet-like earth.

Here, indeed, was a scene of tragedy that tore with great and cruel talons into the last marshalling of hope and courage, and strength and endurance of the two survivors.

Masses of thunder cloud were still rolling across the sky; the coppery hue of which gave to the surrounding sky a grey and threatening appearance. A light breeze now reached down and whipped the leafy tops of the pines and firs; murmuring in marked contrast to the occasional rumble of thunder and the blinding violet of the lightning that raced along in the wake of the stampeding herds.

While below, on all sides in the tragic, ghostly semi-darkness of dawn, were scenes of destruction,

misery, suffering and agony; surely reflected in the spirit of pathos and defeat that was evident in the child's beautiful eyes.

Valma stopped as she came to where a trunk of a fir tree lay uprooted and caught in its downward plunge by the branches of neighbouring trees; grim evidence of a losing fight of Nature against a titanic enemy. Tears moistened her eyes as she observed other trees torn up and broken off close to the ground. A few had been snapped as if they had been puny twigs. The child was reminded of an incident when her cotton dress had accidentally caught on a branch of a young fir. She had been joking with False and was trying to escape from him in the bluff at the back of the cabin. She had broken the twig with hardly any conscious effort. These young champions of the valley had been twisted and snapped with apparently as little effort as when she had released her dress.

And these trees had been her companions.

These champions were alive just as much as Snowflake, King, Tweedy, and the badger. She suddenly remembered that the lame badger had come to her on God's Five Acres for help, the same as Flight-Commander and the others. Now these firs and poplars, and pines and spruce, were hurt. Maybe there is an unknown, invisible spirit that comes and helps trees, like she had helped the pets, thought Valma. The child thrilled at the possibility. Glancing up to where two of the trees were resting against others, and sensing a feeling of sympathy and companionship, the girl experienced a

glow of consolation in trusting that there was such a spirit.

On second thoughts, it appeared impossible that these trees could be snapped off so easily. But when Valma looked to the ground again and her eyes caught sight of the inert forms of the cattle that lay sprawling at each trunk she realized the concerted force of the blow. She pictured the sea of infuriated beasts that had swept the wagon into the air at the campsite as if it had been a straw before a cyclone. She appreciated the tremendous impact under which the trees had finally yielded.

As Valma stood watching the stricken animals one close to her moved its head, turning a confused gaze in her direction. At first the girl read fear and horror in its eyes, and although in immediate danger of the beast struggling to its feet and charging toward her in its effort to join its comrades, she felt rooted to the ground. The next instant she sensed an expression of an appeal—mute and pitiable—in the place of fear; perhaps, the merciful hand of some unseen, master medium dominating the animal's instincts and feelings, prompting it to turn to mankind for help and succour in its hour of affliction. The injured creature made a brave effort to regain its feet, but fell back across the carcasses of its kin.

Valma's attention was suddenly arrested by something moving through the forest a short distance away. She rushed to the side of Dummy. She clutched his arm nervously. Thoughts of Darkness Jim and his wolf-hound flashed to her with threatening and graphic intensity. The escape on the rim

of the Kutawa canyon, the sight of Darkness Jim and his dog madly driving the frenzied herds across the clearing, once again gripped at her heart and mind with claws of steel; tearing down her last reserve of courage and strength, summoned to give help and spirit to Eric and Cay and Ninga and Sky.

There was no doubt, despaired Valma, that the men had been hurt when the wagon had been swept into the air and capsized. Perhaps—the girl's heart seemed to stop beating at the thought—the men had been *seriously* injured, and were now in great pain and suffering. And perhaps—a lump came to her throat—Eric, who had really saved *her* life, or Cay, or Sky, or Ninga—perhaps, all—had been killed.

Dummy followed the direction of Valma's worried gaze.

He observed the leaves and branches of the underbrush move fitfully. Some person, apparently, making their way through the forest, was carefully watching the movements of Valma and himself; taking precaution to avoid detection, lest some probable plan of evil design be frustrated.

Dummy's first impulse was to rush over to the underbrush where the person was hiding. Now was the time to call account for the stampede and the tragedy brought in its pathway. Right now was the time to avenge the many wrongs in the past; still vividly impressed in the man's memory. This was the moment that he had been waiting for—it seemed—all his life. Fate and destiny had delivered to his hands the culprit of a dozen similar tragedies; duty to his calling, in the name of mankind, urged

him to act immediately in the rightful exercise of the law.

His fists clenched until the nails burned into his palms; his lips set in a determined expression of heated action. If ever the resolve to kill showed in a man's eyes, in those of Dummy—God-loving, peaceful, and compassionate—that resolve was striking in its intensity.

Dummy felt Valma's grip on his arm relax. The child's whole weight slumped against his body.

He was in a quandary.

He was undecided whether to leave the unconscious girl on a grassy patch a few feet distant, and to obey his first impulse, or to carry her out of the forest to the less-wooded outskirts. He wanted to get her safely to an open clearing; now discernible in the distance.

He decided on the latter plan. It might have the desired effect of drawing his assailant into the open; thereby eliminating any possibility of the fiend's escape into the depths of the forest.

Picking Valma up bodily he started walking between the trees and round the stricken cattle. His set purpose was to reach the clearing as quickly as possible. He felt that his opponent was following closely to one side; preparing to spring from ambush at any instant, to throw him to the ground in a desperate struggle. Twice Dummy stopped. Through a gift of sensing, acclaimed in the Touchwoods as super-natural, he heard the distinct, quick snapping of dried twigs and branches under a heavy weight. A deadly silence would follow.

Dummy visualized a heinous monster, with cruel

and gripping talons, reaching out to crush him and his precious burden.

He felt that at any second now, he must suddenly place Valma in a protected spot between the trees and then, as quick as a flash, swing round to meet the towering arch-fiend; or to be faced with the alternative of being thrown down unmercifully without the ghost of a chance to help or save the girl from injury.

Dummy also felt the imperative need of fighting for time.

Continuing cautiously he soon reached the edge of the less-wooded area, and although he quickened his pace, it seemed that he would never get to the brightness of the clearing just ahead.

He *must* fight for time to reach the open. If he fought the enemy in the forest, and anything happened to him so that he could not carry the girl to safety, she might not be found for several days. Dummy felt certain that cowboys from Pine Needle were now anxiously searching for the child. If he managed to get her to the open there would be a better chance of her being found and helped.

In the open he could face his assailant as man to man. He could carry the battle to a finish. It was to be complete submission of this tyrant, whose crimes in the Touchwoods had brought misery, suffering, destruction of property and even death. Yes, fate and destiny had delivered to his hands the perpetrator of these tragedies. It was his duty to clean the foothills—once and for all time—of this enemy.

Dummy tightened his hold on the soft and



slender form of Valma as he resolved to gain more ground; steeled to fight for every second and every step that would take him nearer to the open prairie.

His whole frame was tense in readiness for the fray. A thought that he was totally unequal to the herculean task disturbed the man for a fleeting second. That his spent energy, his bruised and throbbing muscles, would fail him. He quickly dismissed the thought. He assured himself that he *had* the strength and endurance. His broad and powerful shoulders and his firm and well-controlled muscles would *not* fail. He could fight two, or three, of any such fiends; even though to do so might take every atom of life in his body. He could and would be the victor. But the first victory would be to get to the clearing. To be sure that once he had a grip on the foe there would be no escape.

Valma moved slightly. She opened her eyes.

The movement stimulated Dummy to greater action. He was happy; then sorry, then greatly alarmed. The child was recovering. Perhaps it would have been better for her to be spared the sight of the fight with the enemy. He realized that from her position she could glance directly across his shoulder. She might look right into the face of the object of her fright; possibly as it was about to leap upon them. At that moment there would be an immensity of horror, an enormity of disaster, an intensity of tragedy and catastrophe in the stark and glaring eyes that would meet those of the girl. Eyes of a monstrous demon that would strike and burn into the very heart and soul of the child. Her frayed nerves, her far-spent strength, the last re-

serve of her indomitable courage would not stand the shock; that it would kill her was Dummy's firm conviction.

In an effort to shut off the girl's view of the enemy, Dummy thrust his left shoulder forward.

He struggled on, first stepping cautiously between the branches of a fallen tree, now jumping to one side to avoid a creature that had been killed in the rampage.

Noise of the breaking of twigs behind came louder.

He had hardly cleared the carcass of a large steer when the noise of his follower suddenly became so loud and so close that Dummy steeled himself in readiness to spring round forcibly to attack.

The next instant he felt something touch him square in the middle of the back.

Perplexed and amazed, Dummy changed his mind.

Through his flannel shirt he felt the thing, warm and large, as it moved up and down his back in a threatening manner.

He concluded that he was covered with a weapon. To swing round now would be to challenge his follower to fire. The shot would strike the girl. It would kill her. Dummy quickly realized that his only salvation lay in his continuing to walk forward; totally ignoring the weapon and its owner. He would wait for an opportunity to catch the enemy off his guard.

The terrorizing pressure on his back was gone. Except for the swishing of dried leaves and the cracking of underbrush as Dummy walked, and the

soft breathing of Valma, there was an uncanny silence.

The man had a strange and terrifying premonition that the foe was now crouching in readiness to spring upon them; to throw them to the ground, to lock with him in a death struggle.

It seemed to Dummy that a single file of mice was unmercifully scampering up and down his spine, and then around his neck and across his shoulders. He could actually feel the hundreds of tiny, cold-wet claws as they dug and clutched into his flesh. He became suddenly conscious of the roots of his hair; to each there was a sharp sting. Clear and quick thinking was becoming an impossibility. His throat became parched. He could not stand the agony much longer. He tried to swallow to relieve the pain, but a cleaving of his tongue to the roof of his mouth almost choked him.

Presently—barely a few seconds, but seemingly an age—his legs went limp. He was horrified. He was going to collapse. He would hurt Valma when he fell. He clutched the girl until he thought he would hurt the frail form, but still he could not feel her body. Had he lost all sense of feeling in his arms? Now the girl was trembling. He could sense that. He wondered if the child—despite his careful guarding—was at this very minute gazing into the face of the foe just when it was going to leap upon them.

Dummy stopped.

He was utterly fagged; gasping for breath he was tempted to sink to the prairie—to plead for mercy.

A loud crashing of twigs, a trampling of underbrush, a heavy, steady tearing and swishing of leaves immediately checked him. His assailant had made the expected move. He was racing toward them.

A new spurt of herculean strength and action suddenly took possession of Dummy; imbuing him with a spirit of fighting madness. His whole body grew tense, his strong and square jaw set in grim determination, an expression of frenzy and jubilation and victory was in his eyes. Glancing to one side he observed a sheltered spot near the protection of two trees. Stooping quickly he placed Valma on the ground, then quickly straightened in readiness to battle his follower.

"Peter!—*You?*" Dummy spoke loudly and with deep feeling.

As he finished the words Valma gazed up. The next instant she was on her feet. She clutched the man's arm. Simultaneously, she caught sight of her pet, now alongside. Gazing from the animal to Dummy excitedly, she shook the man's arm.

"Dummy!—You called!—You shouted: 'Peter'! Dummy! Tell me you can *really* talk—just like I can!" She clambered at his shoulders. With tears in her eyes she looked up appealingly.

Dummy turned away. He looked toward the clearing. Words would not come. Even those that were on his finger tips failed to find speech.

Valma dropped her head against the man's side in disappointment. Youth and faith had almost won over apparent tragedy; the light of the birth of

wonder and joy had been one second within her grasp, the next to be lost and beyond hope.

With fire and pathos, yet clear-headed and courageous, she stepped toward the horse.

"Peter. My Peter! Not *hurt*? No, not even a weeny scratch, as far as I can see. Peter? You heard Dummy speak? You must have—he called your name!"

The animal stepped forward and rubbed its velvety, warm nose affectionately against Valma's shoulder.

## CHAPTER XIX

### SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Out in the clearing where the morning sun—now peeping through the fast fleeting and spreading thunder clouds—gave a striking and living brightness in comparison with the dark and ominous silence of the Black Forest, and where the crimson and purple chicory blossoms spread a witchery of perfume in the shadows, Dummy partially recovered from the ordeal of the stampede. The terraced toward the Pryor homesite, the strenuous and fying sight of the sea of charging monsters as they nerve-racking fight to stem the titanic tide of destruction, and then the onslaught at the wagon, and latterly the wild ride on the steer's back, were gripping incidents that would live forever in his memory. But the great strain—mental and physical—that he had suffered during the time when Valma's life had been in his care was instantly relieved upon reaching the light and safety of the clearing.

He was ready to drop from fatigue. He knew that to allow his aching body and mind to relax would be to give his injured muscles and throbbing limbs a chance to knit back to normal. The experience and the endurance had been ones against which all flesh and blood rebelled. On the other hand, his spirit prompted him to shout for joy, to dance

with happiness at the safe deliverance of himself so that he had been able to save the child Valma.

Valma, holding the man's shirt sleeve where it was rolled above the elbow, walked along silently, while Peter, without saddle and with its halter broken, followed a few paces behind.

The girl tried to analyse the crowded moments of the last few hours and days.

It seemed years ago—almost as long ago as when Flight-Commander came fluttering to her feet with a broken wing—since she and Dummy had taken that long and fast ride on the steer's back; yet it was just a little while. So much had happened that she could not clearly remember *everything*. She had seen so much suffering and had experienced so many escapes that the night when Eric saved her from 'Darkness Jim at the canyon, and the time when the wagon had been capsized, had already been crowded into distant corners of her memory.

She felt, however, that the bellowing of the cattle, the shrieks of the men, and the words that Dummy had actually spoken with his lips would echo in her heart for years.

So much had happened that she felt old! Almost as old as a grown-up woman. As old as Snowflake, she told herself. And nobody knew just how old she was. Her passing thought of the negress recalled that False always said she was as "old as the hills," and that she must be mighty old because he supposed she was once a cook for the animals in Noah's Ark.

Valma tugged at Dummy's sleeve. He stopped. She gazed at him questioningly.

"Gee, whitterkins!" she ejaculated, "Dummy, we're lucky! Must have been born like the fairies. Remember? The witches were born old, but the fairies live young forever and forever!" There was a faint suggestion of merriment in the child's voice. A smile broke through her tired and troubled expression.

"There I go again!" she remonstrated quietly. "I will keep forgettin' you're deaf, an' away I talk without you hearin'!" She released her hold on his sleeve. Hesitating at the spelling of new and untried words she started on her fingers: "Jest—like the fairies. We are lucky, and will always be young."

She stopped to glance at Dummy for a nod of attention and acknowledgment that he was following her message.

"We are lucky because we are not a bit hurt. And after all those terrible happenings. And they happened—all at once! And we don't look old—like witches. But—I feel old. As old as Snowy. And I suppose you do, but you don't look any different. You look jest the same, except—"

The man met the questioning gaze of the child's blue eyes. He looked away quickly. He gazed across the clearing where the sun was now turning the tops of the pines and spruce to majestic spears of shining copper and gold. He placed an arm round the girl's shoulders; hugging her closely to his side. She relaxed restfully; happy to recline in the comfort and support of his arm.

Valma felt a splash on her cheek.



She turned quickly. She stood square in front of Dummy. She was amazed.

"Dummy! Dummy, you're cryin'!" There was deep feeling in her voice. She shook him to stress the import of her spoken words. "Dummy, you're a man—an' a brave one. You're a man that would make the smartest mounted policeman in all these foothills. Dummy, you're one of the bravest men in all these ranges, an' *you're* cryin'!"

Valma was nonplussed. She tried to read the man's thoughts.

As far back as the child could remember she could not recall having seen a man cry. In her own life she had tried to live up to the standards of a man's life; the only codes that had been set as an example. To cry, and especially for a *man* to cry, was beyond her understanding.

"Dummy, you must have been thinkin' something sad—for you to *cry*!" she asserted, speaking with her lips. She gazed at him appealingly. "What is it? Maybe something you don't want to tell me about," she added quickly. "I'm sorry for askin', Dummy. Please forgive me, but—" She snuggled closer to his side. For a few seconds she was quiet, part of the mass of shining curls ruffled against his shoulder. "But—I always—want you to be glad, an'—I don't understand—when you're not happy." The words were barely audible as they trailed off to a smothered whisper.

Dummy's lips moved in readiness to speak, but were as quickly closed, as if in determination not to attempt to voice the words on the tip of his tongue. Presently, taking his hand from the girl's

tousled hair, he gave the answer slowly: "It is something that you should know, Valma. It is about yourself. I was wondering—"

Valma looked from the man's fingers to his face. With dilated eyes she anxiously awaited the solution to her puzzled thoughts; trying to read the unfinished message in his moistened eyes. She was impatient at his hesitation.

"Yes! yes!—I'm listenin'!" she urged, speaking the words as if he could hear normally. "About *me*?" she queried, hurriedly. The thought was incredible. "About *me*—that you were *cryin'*? Dummy, I still don't understand."

There was a deep silence. The fragrance of chicory, bluebell, and other prairie blossoms, passed like a spirit hand between them. Dummy stared across the peaceful clearing, vainly trying to analyse his innermost feelings; considering, for the second, what would be the most tactful action to follow so as not to bewilder the child and at the same time to be as sincere as his natural characteristics demanded.

"I was wondering what I would do if—if anything happened to you, Valma, dear. I mean—if anything changed your life so as to take you away—from these ranges, from Pine Needle." Dummy's hands were still for a moment. It seemed that the import of his message slowed up his fingers awkwardly. "I never want you to go away, Valma. I—do not know what I—we would all do without you."

He turned away as he finished; looking into space, and directly away from the girl's searching

eyes. It appeared to him that this morning, more than at any time he had known the child, her pretty eyes pierced him through and through, questing for an answer that would not come; glances that commanded a reply to puzzled thoughts that one moment promised the beginning of a greater and deeper companionship, the next moment to threaten—by a misunderstanding—to undermine a friendship that, during the many months they had travelled the ranges of Touchwood Hills together, had grown with profound appreciation and mutual understanding.

"It would be a funny country—without you," he added in conclusion.

"Ha, Dummy, you're the one that's *funny!*" Valma quickly followed her spoken words with the same message on her fingers. "Yes, as funny as False," she emphasized in definite and sharp movements. "What would *you* do *without* me? Folks would think you are the same as Flight-Commander, and King, and—all the other pets. Jest—because I am not around—you would go hungry. Maybe, jest for one meal. And what about Snowflake? She is the one you all would miss mighty much. Without Snowy all the men would be digging for worms—big woolly ones, like Flight-Commander does when I don't get back in time to fuss with him. Ha, Dummy, that feeling is—jest plain being hungry, and that should not make you *cry!*"

A smile crept over the man's features as he pictured the girl's thoughts. He realized the great gap that existed between his feelings and the child's

interpretation. The more he thought of it the more amusing it became.

"That is right, Valma," he agreed. "I don't know what any of us would do without Snowy. The way she looks after our innards is a marvel. She is the best ranch cook—plus, without an equal, plus—that I have ever seen in captivity. Let us make sure we always keep her—under strict orders, sentenced to a life term, so to speak, in the cook-shed of Pine Needle ranch." Dummy felt relieved as he saw the girl's troubled and puzzled expression change to that of contentment and understanding, and then to one of pleasurable relaxation.

A ribbon of song—rich, deep, and inspiring—trailed out over the morning breeze.

Valma stood still for the moment as she listened intently; trying to catch the words of the lilting melody that came from among the pines to the northwest of the clearing.

Faintly, but clear and crisp, came the legend:

*"Love came calling to me one morning,  
While the dew was still on the flowers;  
Love came calling with heart—"*

The ribbon of music and the broken message of a love song thinned out softly. The next second it was lost in the distance and depth of the woods.

Valma glanced at Dummy. The first line of the song was ringing and re-ringing in her ears.

"Dummy, did you hear—that?" she began in spoken words. She studied his face for an answer; hoping for betoken in his expression. "Yes, you

must have heard!" she inferred quickly, speaking with her fingers once again. "You must have heard, because—you stopped talking! Dummy, honest-and-truly, did you hear? Somebody singing? A man on horseback. Yet—I do not know who it could be," she reflected.

Dummy did not answer. He continued to gaze across the clearing; seemingly in deep meditation. His senses told him that a horseman was travelling through the bluffs and along the ridge beyond the stretch of open country. That report flashed to him, and as quickly from him, but he found himself wondering at the spirit of the song that his senses also flashed to him. It was in perfect harmony with his feelings; an intensity and concentration of a single line that had the healing touch of a mystic. An incident that was in unison with a great and deep yearning.

Peter, grazing leisurely a few yards from where they were standing, suddenly raised its head, pricked its ears, and gazed attentively toward the Pryor clearing.

"We must hurry," broke in Valma, recalling the harrowing experience that had carried them far from their comrades in the fight at the wagon. Once again the countless repetitions of the tragic episodes in the blackness, and the grim scenes in the vivid flashes of lightning came and went in her brain like the sounding of treacherous breakers on a distant shore. "We must hurry—ever so much, to help Eric, an' Ninga an' Sky an' Mr. Pryor. Perhaps—they are hurt badly, an'—perhaps—" There was anxiety in the girl's voice as the spoken

words softened away in deep feeling of apprehension.

Reaching her pony, Valma sprung to the animal's back and started off in the direction of the Pryor campsite, while Dummy, walking alongside, once again realized—more than ever before—his code of duty toward a world of law and order. Inwardly he sensed that a master spirit had brought to him the brimming cup of life; quickening his own spirit toward all life afresh.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE GREATER FRIENDSHIP

Just before the Pryor clearing was within sight round the edge of a poplar bluff, Valma, riding Peter, could not restrain herself to keep pace with Dummy; walking alongside. She explained the thought on her fingers; suggesting that she should hurry on. The man did not favor the plan. He realized that the girl was on the verge of a nervous break-down. He had hoped to save her the sight that must be waiting at the campsite, but when she expressed with firm emphasis her determination to help the new settlers, should they be hurt, Dummy knew that in the end she would be happier; despite the sights and shocks that might have to be endured in the meantime.

Now Dummy was faced with another problem.

He was about to urge that he either run ahead while she rode along leisurely, or that he ride while she followed slowly to the clearing, but at a slight pressure of Valma's heels the saddle-beast broke into a lazy trot. At a firm dig of one heel the animal took up a spirited pace; leaving Dummy to give his silent message to the wind.

Cantering between the straggling trees, round the sprawled carcasses of the maimed cattle, up a short slope, Valma reached the edge of the camp.

She could not believe what she saw. When she

fully realized that the scene of ruin, desolation, and tragedy before her had actually taken place, tears came to her eyes. Her head started to whirl. She quickly blotted out the sight with her hand. She sobbed pitifully. She heard herself calling for Dummy, wondering why he was so long in reaching her. She could not bear to look at the sight again; the inert forms of magnificent monsters, scattered across the campsite and the wreckage of the barricade and the wagon. Near where the tent had been pitched, the creatures were piled on top of one another, while to one side two striking specimens were vainly trying to regain their feet, despite the fact that they were gored from back to stomach; wraiths of a noble herd tragically vanquished.

Valma dared not think of the men. No doubt—she thought in her daze—they are badly hurt, perhaps killed, and probably lying among the mangled carcasses of the cattle at the *débris* of the wagon. She felt herself calling man each by name, hoping and praying to hear the magic of their voices in answer. Her head was whirling! Her ears were ringing and pounding as if they were going to burst! Would Dummy *never* come? Suddenly, Peter became excited. It started to prance in a puzzled fashion. It reared and snorted in readiness to race away from the spectacle of agony and death. Instinctively, Valma felt urged to master the pony. She gripped the head-band of the halter. Patting the animal comfortingly she soon allayed its fears; thereby helping to regain her own composure. She relaxed her hold on the halter. Sliding to the



ground she covered her face in the crook of her arm.

Dummy reached the camp. Running up the slope he stood dumbfounded.

He caught sight of Peter between the stricken cattle. His eyes rested on a huddled heap. Rushing to Valma's side he placed an arm about her.

"Valma, sweetheart. It was *this*—that I wanted to save you from," he whispered mentally.

Leaving the girl as comfortable as possible, he quickly repaired one of the cots. Recovering some blankets he wrapped her up warmly. Assured that she would benefit from a sleep he stood up and surveyed the scene before him for a sign of the homesteaders and the cowboys.

When he found no trace of the men he became dismayed and alarmed. He searched diligently for some indication as to what had happened. Pulling aside the wreckage of the wagon and logs of the barricade he looked in every conceivable place where his comrades might possibly have been trapped. He glanced along the pathway of destruction left by the cattle. His eyes examined every object along the torn and strewn prairie, but he failed to find any clue as to the whereabouts of the men; or an inkling as to whether they had survived.

His attention was caught by moving objects in the distance. He was somewhat relieved as he realized that the figures were men. Beyond doubt, the figures were the cowboys and the homesteaders. He was dismayed, however, as his eyes counted *three* men instead of *four*. He was as instantly alarmed and again perturbed. On further scrutiny

he observed that two of the men were carrying a stretcher on which a third man was resting. A tall person was at the front, a short figure at the rear, while another figure, resembling Cay Pryor, was limping alongside.

The mere specks had appeared from the edge of a cottonwood grove as if a curtain had been lifted and the puppets of a marionette play had entered upon a stage to enact their parts in a pantomime of woodland drama.

Dummy's mind was a big question mark.

Tired beyond relaxation, he was almost unable to stand for want of sleep and rest. His frayed nerves and aching muscles protested against further torture. His bruised and bleeding arms and legs pained excruciatingly.

He hardly knew what to do for the moment.

Happy in the knowledge that the three men had been miraculously saved from death he was worried about the young homesteader.

Dummy's immediate reaction was to drop to the ground; to rest in readiness to help his comrades when they arrived. 'It seemed that he would be unable to wait until they reached the clearing. He wondered how he had managed to survive the many experiences.

He continued to watch the figures making their way at a snail's pace across the prairie. He startled as the one resembling Cay dropped to the ground. The speck made a gallant attempt to stand up, but fell back and remained still.

The figures, smudges against a verdant foreground and a background of the deeper hues of the

forest evergreens, held Dummy's gaze. The silent, spirit-like actions hypnotized him. Now the tall figure and the shorter character stopped. They rested their burden in a sheltered place. They rushed to Cay. Dummy found himself unconsciously putting out his hands as if he would help raise the stricken figure, but instantly checked himself.

He glanced away from the puppet play. Looking over the clearing he attempted to readjust his vision; blurred and dimmed by the strain of distance and fatigue. He wondered if the scene in the far valley and the sight about him was life, *real* life, in which he was also playing a part, or whether it was all part of a tragic dream from which he would soon happily awake.

Glancing back to the puppet play he was again startled and puzzled at the appearance of another figure. From behind a clump of balsams a person, striking colors about the shoulders, had come running to the punchers. Dummy saw the vivid colors before he saw the man. An Indian with his colored blanket, was his hurried assumption. Now the three figures were bending over the stricken settler. Now a decision. They stood up. The figure of the colors stopped. He picked the man up bodily then started off ahead of the cowboys. The two picked up the stretcher. They continued toward the campsite.

The procession passed from Dummy's view into the folding curtains of a leafy bluff.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to throw off an over-powering desire to sleep. He looked around for the best place to pitch a new camp; attempting

to shake off his weariness in action. Selecting a comparatively clear stretch near the remains of the torn tent and scattered equipment and supplies, he soon had logs placed around a fire of dried birch and willow branches. It was good to smell the smoke. It gave courage and hope. He felt happy in the thought that the smoke, carried on the breeze to the broken and injured men, would sense to them comfort and courage and vigor.

He followed up the thought by wondering how his companions would like to catch the smell of sizzling bacon and hot coffee. He smiled as he pictured their noses twitching expectantly as they caught a wisp of such a feast. He could also see their faces beaming as they moistened their lips, and swallowed in anticipation. It would give them new life, indeed, was his serious summation.

The thought prompted appropriate action.

Searching among the ruins of the provisions, Dummy found coffee, bacon and beans. He commenced to hum a tune in his happiness.

Placing the food on one of the logs he retrieved the camp kettle from beneath a wheel of the wagon. A hasty inspection of its trampled and battered condition instantly condemned it to the edge of a bluff. He found a pail. Except for a dent it had escaped serious damage. Walking to a nearby slough, he returned with spring water. Within a few moments he had the bacon sizzling and the coffee boiling merrily.

When the cowboys and the stranger in the bright colors did not put in an appearance in answer to the silent summons to breakfast, Dummy was momen-

tarily disappointed. He adjudged there might still be time to erect what remained of the tent. He selected some poles and soon had the canvas stretched. He then set about to make two temporary cots from poles and branches.

Satisfied that his hasty efforts assured, at least, a small degree of welcome and help to the returning men, Dummy decided to try the coffee.

He rummaged about the *débris* of the camp equipment for a cup. Despite his careful search he could only find the remains of three tin mugs. He was about to give up and to use the tin mug that was the least damaged, when he caught sight of a dainty, delicately-decorated china cup. Except for a broken handle it was intact. Painted in deep orange and gold, between borders of black, countless faces were artistically portrayed in a multi-colored design.

"What a dainty l'le cup," he whispered mentally. "No place for such a treasure. Bah!—I could crush it to a hundred pieces with one grip. Just—like I would the man, whoever he is, who is to blame for all this trouble. This tiny, pretty cup. The cup of a thousand faces. 'Tis sure out of place in this tough country," he mused philosophically. "Tin mugs—hard as iron—is the type for up here," he explained good-naturedly. "Just look—would you look at all those pictures? Those faces, a thousand, and perhaps more. Maybe 'tis hand-painted. From some loving friend—or relation. But yet—" Dummy reviewed with whimsical irony, "it survived, and the tin mugs—got all bent to hell! It survived—all but the handle—and that's

ornamental, anyhow. It's the only cup left. The only one that got past that stampede rumpus. Must be a—loving cup. Well—here she goes!" He smiled meditatively as he dipped the frail piece of china into the steaming coffee.

Sitting on the log he sipped the beverage. It cheered him. It soothed him softly out of dull sobriety. It made him think of all the pleasant things that had happened to him. He glanced over the brim and through the steam to the bundled heap resting on the broken cot. She would like some coffee, he thought. It would help her to be happy, if just for the moment. And in a pretty and dainty cup—like this one? A cup for a princess, and—surely she was one of the first court.

"Just like this I'll cup—dainty and a real treasure."

Dummy continued to muse as he watched the sleeping form. "And I'm one of the tin mugs. One of the old tin mugs—all twisted and bent to hell." He laughed aloud at the analogy.

He considered that Valma was resting too comfortably and sleeping too soundly to be disturbed. She was in dire need of refreshment, but she also required, to a greater degree, the healing and soothing powers of sleep. He decided to let the girl rest for a while longer.

He returned his gaze to the crackling fire. The bright sun on the flames dazzled him as he blew the steam away and sipped the coffee. Every few seconds he changed his fingers as the heat tingled those that held the cup. Twice he dozed and checked himself as he almost fell asleep. He shook his head

vigorously and opened his eyes wide several times in an effort to awaken himself fully, but, presently, his eyes closed. His head nodded.

The cup slipped from his grip to break into a dozen pieces on a stone between his feet.

## CHAPTER XXI

### GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN

When the full force of the stampede swept across the Pryor homesite, crashing down the barricade and tilting the wagon at a dangerous angle before demolishing it, the homesteaders and cowboys had caught sight of Dummy as he clutched Valma and leapt to the back of the steer. It all happened so quickly that the men hardly had time to realize what had transpired before they too were faced with the alternative of following Dummy's action or to be trampled beneath the hoofs of the mad-dened horde.

A flash of lightning, cutting the blackness of night, had given a noonday brilliance to the scene of tragedy. The turbulent sea of bellowing creatures stretched as far as the eye could see, while clouds of steam from the animals, gave to the sight a weird and ghostly setting.

Now the charge was aimed full force across the clearing; the center leaders headed directly for the barricade. The timbers, heavy packing cases, and camp furniture cracked and splattered like match-wood. On came the charge as if the obstacle of logs and equipment was but tangled grass. Reaching the wagon there was a heaving and tossing as the comparatively slight resistance was offered. With the concerted force of the racing cattle that



followed in the wake of the leaders there was no bulwark against the impact.

It was a matter of seconds before the final crash.

There was another streak of lightning. Dummy had grasped Valma and had jumped from the wagon. A second later they were swallowed up in the darkness and chaos of the night.

The cowboys, adept at riding cattle, would not have hesitated for a second to follow Dummy's lead if it had not been for the apparently hopeless plight of Cay and Eric. In fact, it was a challenge that both Sky and Ninga would have keenly welcomed if only there had been a gallery of champion riders of wild steers to pass judgment on their respective performances. Both knew, however, that for any person without experience to attempt to ride stampeding animals, would mean a quick and terrible end.

Instantly, the giant cowboy decided.

"Nin!" he shouted above the bellowing. While he spoke many of the creatures were being unmercifully crowded and trampled at the broken barricade. Several were struggling for life at the wagon as it was gradually easing under the terrific pressure. "Nin," repeated Sky, "take care of Eric! Ride 'longside of him. Work to the edge of the herd. Drive your critter out, or keep a-jumpin' on the other critters toward the edge! Take care of the youngster!"

Ninga did not wait to hear all of his companion's command. He saw the plan. He caught sight of one of the homesteaders as he jumped to the back of an animal. He quickly leapt to the same one.

While Sky had been shouting to Ninga, Eric had helped his father to spring safely to one of the herd.

The tall puncher was quick as a flash to follow. He had intended taking care of Cay himself, but when he discovered that the aged settler had already left the wagon and that Ninga was on the same beast, he turned to help Eric. Suddenly the young homesteader followed the short cowboy's lead. Sky landed on another creature directly behind the one on which Eric was astride. Through the darkness the cowboys endeavoured to force the animals to a less dangerous position at the edge of the racing horde.

The steers reared and bucked beneath the clutching weight of the men. Further infuriated they charged those ahead. Finding no relief from their burdens they horned and kicked out viciously at those that crowded and bunted.

Cay had not been on the steer many seconds before he began to feel the effects of his strenuous fighting. He was greatly fatigued by the long and arduous day's work at camp-making. The many hours without sleep while he had watched over Valma had sapped much of his strength and energy.

On two occasions, when the animal bucked forcibly, he felt himself about to be thrown off, but each time Ninga had placed an arm round him; giving the man renewed courage to fight on.

After a while there was a slowing up directly in front. The creatures tried to climb over one another in their frantic haste to gain ground. They massed up and crowded together until the pitiful beasts were gasping for breath. There was a flash

of lightning. In the bright light the tall puncher saw that the leaders at the right flank had been forced through a grove of cottonwoods and to the edge of a large slough. Despite their efforts to turn from the water, many were forced into the mud and tangled weeds that dragged them deeper with each move to extricate themselves. A few that had gained a fair lead managed to plunge free from the morass and were swimming across the lake, while others, not having sufficient leeway, were floundering hopelessly beneath the trampling hoofs of the followers.

Sky climbed to his feet on the back of the steer. He jumped from animal to animal until he was abreast the one that the young settler was riding.

"Quick! Eric!" he shouted forcibly. "Jump to your feet! Climb over the critters. Make for the right of the slough!"

Eric managed to stand up. Nervously he jumped from his beast safely across three others. He was about to leap to another when it suddenly bounded forward and to one side; throwing him headlong between the cattle. Sky saw him fall. The cowboy immediately sat astride one of the steers and caught hold of Eric's shoulders. By sheer force he dragged the homesteader to the back of the beast, but not before the settler's leg had been twisted and crushed.

"Go on—go on without me," Eric gasped. "Look after—my—father," he added feebly.

In the meantime, the animal on which Ninga and Cay were riding had reached the water's edge. It was among those being engulfed in the quagmire.

Together they crawled across the wearied bodies of several creatures until they reached a clear space of the slough. The cowboy sank into the mud and water up to his knees. Reaching deeper water he started to wade to the off-side shore, while Cay rested on a small island of sand-bar willows.

Ninga shouted back to ascertain if the homesteader was following. Not getting an answer the cowboy became alarmed. He turned back. Calling again as he went to where he first entered the water, he heard the man's voice. He struck out to where Cay was now wading through the swamp brush in an effort to reach the shore. The cowboy helped the man. Staggering through the marshes they reached dry ground. Cay dropped exhausted.

Ninga endeavoured to locate Sky and Eric. Cupping his hands he shouted his companion's name several times. He heard Sky's reply from somewhere out in the water.

Ninga tried to peer through the darkness, to catch sight of his comrade. He hoped and prayed that another flash of lightning would come to guide him, but except for a distant, faint glow the storm was apparently spent. After a while he heard two distinct shouts, Sky's signal, from the far side of the water. He felt happy now that Sky and the young settler had reached the safety of the opposite shore. He was also happy in the fact that the main herd of the stampede had passed to the left side of the lake; in the direction of Black Forest. He felt worried, however, about Dummy and Valma. How had they fared?

## CHAPTER XXII

### TRAIL OF BROKEN DREAMS

"Ho, hi-i-i—Dumm-e-e—feller me lad! Ship ahoy, an' keep the home fires a-burnin'! Ride 'em cowboy! Ride 'em!"

The high-pitched, ringing voice of Ninga broke the silence of the clearing as the procession of the returning comrades climbed the short, steep slope to the campsite. An Indian, a blanket of many colors round his shoulders assisted Cay as he walked, while the punchers, carrying the stretcher, followed.

"Naw! Not so good, neither," corrected the cowboy as he recalled that the man could not hear his words. "Suppose 'tis 'bout time I took to learnin' that tricky motion talk. Jest as soon as I git to spellin', an' can spot the right fingers." He addressed his remarks to Sky as they stopped. They lowered the stretcher near where the torn canvas of the tent had been pitched.

Dummy, aroused from his sleep by sensing someone behind him, jumped to his feet. He was nervously excited at the thought of new dangers. He wheeled round quickly and faced the men. It was a few seconds before he fully realized that he was still at the clearing and that his companions had returned. The haze of suspicion, uncertainty and bewilderment cleared away. Stepping over the log

he greeted them; his puzzled expression changing to one of relief and joy at their safe deliverance.

"An' what about our l'le lady—the 'angel,' as Ninga calls her? She's not hurt?" was Sky's anxious enquiry.

Dummy sensed the import of the question. Turning round he indicated that Valma was not injured. He assured the men in a pantomimic way that it would be better to let her sleep for a while.

The cowboys lifted Eric gently from the crude stretcher. They carried him to the shelter of the tent canvas, placing him onto one of the cots. Sky covered him with a quilt and the Indian's blanket. Ninga supported the homesteader's head and gave him some coffee. When told that his leg was somewhat easier the punchers left him.

Sitting on the logs beside the fire the men took the food served by Dummy. The Indian made several trips to nearby bluffs, returning each time with a generous armful of dried wood which he piled up in readiness to be thrown onto the fire.

The men were downcast. Worn out and fatigued they were wearied as never before. Their bodies were bruised, their muscles were numbed and throbbed intolerably, their feet burned, and their heads ached feverishly. They were beyond conversation; even for the occasional remark or request during the meal.

There was an uncanny strangeness in the silence. A note of grim tragedy permeated the gathering. Cay was the most depressed.

Gazing into the blazing fire he was alarmed about Eric. The cowboys had made an examina-

tion, and although they found that no bones were broken—as far as they could ascertain—the leg had been wrenched severely, and a large, ugly bruise on the right hip told of a possible serious injury. They were scores of miles from medical aid, and to know that his son was in pain, hurt Cay like a knife in his side. It had been generally agreed that the homesteader would be best helped if allowed to rest and sleep before the injuries were treated.

So much had happened within a few short hours. The aged settler could not think clearly. It was the last straw!

For a few moments his thoughts recalled the many misfortunes suffered before summoning courage to make a new start in an unknown land. Magnified by his fagged and dazzled mind they seemed to belong to the multitudes. It *had* taken *real* courage! So much, that he wondered how he had commanded enough courage for the new attempt. And now that he was ready to start life anew, in which he hoped his son would share in the fruits of prosperity, the chance had been whipped away. An opportunity snatched away when within comparatively easy grasp. When power and patience were his, when discouragement, disappointment, and failure—not of his own making, and, therefore, beyond his own control—had been mastered, and high courage had won him a new place, there had suddenly come the greatest blow of all!

He continued to gaze vacantly into the fire while he occasionally sipped coffee from one of the bent and battered tin mugs.

He was tempted to look about him, at the clear-

ing, at the useless remains of the wagon, at the scattered and spoilt provisions and trampled equipment. It had taken every penny that he owned in the world to buy these bare necessities. He was afraid to look about him. Perhaps the story of his new defeat was too boldly inscribed on his mind. Perhaps the story—only one of many—was too much at heart to be brought to actual vision for verification. He felt that he wanted to mark off on some secret scroll the record of another beginning that had ended disastrously. Life had, indeed, been rough; enough to leave him jagged beyond recovery. What was he going to do now? What was going to happen next? A stranger in an unknown land, without—even the visible means of support. Not sufficient supplies to last out a few days, and no possibility whatsoever of securing employment with others less unfortunate than he. It was certainly a serious plight. Never before had he lost courage as now.

Tears moistened the man's eyes as he allowed his thoughts to dwell on his misfortunes; to visualize the forlorn outlook. It was, indeed, the last straw; the last ditch! He knew how it was to be defeated, and then to struggle free to accept a new opportunity, and then to be beaten unmercifully into complete failure. The sun was shining now, but to Cay there was a mist that obscured clear and reasonable thinking.

It had all been so strange, and yet so glorious. The buying of supplies, the trekking on a new trail to an unknown homesite, the anticipation of the future with its untold, but promising story of pros-



perity. The real thrill of accomplishment, the relief of leaving behind disappointments of the past to be absorbed and sanctified in success from regained courage, hope, and energy.

It had been a vista of happiness. The glory of the verdant hills; the inviting silence of the great forests, the welcome hand and warm-hearted hospitality of new settlers, the magic spell of the trail ahead.

Each evening with his son he had chatted at the campfire. Together they had outlined their plans; their log cabin, and how it would be built. The amount of land that could be cultivated the first year, and then the sowing and the harvesting of the crop the second year. A well-tilled garden would meet all their requirements for vegetables. And the hunting of meat—the glory of the chase! It had been—like a fairy story. That was what he had called it the day they arrived at the clearing. Just a few days ago, but it seemed now to belong to some far, distant past.

And now complete failure. He was not in any way to blame for this latest misfortune. It had come and gone without the slightest hint of warning. He was past human help, Cay determined. It seemed that only the gracious and truly chivalrous and understanding hand of some powerful spirit, or the medium of such a magic spirit, could assist any person left in a similar hopeless and tragic predicament. Yet—he theorized, that was not a practical thought.

However, he could not fathom the motive. If there was a motive!

To attack new settlers, who were totally unprepared to withstand even a meagre setback, was beyond belief and rational reasoning. Rather on the contrary, these were the pioneers, the empire-builders who needed and appreciated the timely and helping hand of experience, and the incentive for still greater courage to maintain that faith so often sorely tried.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### CREED OF THE WEST

Sky and Ninga had related to Cay in a casual way that it often happened that a few unscrupulous ranchers, who had ruled their respective ranges for several years, and whose fat, multiplying herds had roamed the hills and valleys year in and year out without molestation, did their utmost to discourage and dishearten new settlers. To such cattle-men, homesteaders with their sod cabins, teams of oxen, and few acres of grain, meant fence or herd laws, and later, growing communities and then townsites, and at last the far-reaching tentacles and network of railways.

They confessed that deep in the heart of every cattle king, altruistic as he might appear toward newcomers, was an ingrained desire and a determination diametrically opposed to all progress of colonization. In short, such progress spelt the doom of the beef barons. That every cowboy was in accord with this ruling was borne out in the fact that resolutely in every puncher's make-up there was a hope and an ambition to become one day a cattle Peer himself; an emperor to sit in power and judgment over a vast domain of rich pasture lands on which thousands of sleek, money-making monsters of the prairie grazed at will. "Riding cowboy" on the ranges was a means to an end rather

than a labor of love; a means toward acquiring the reins of powerful glory that ambition demanded.

With new settlers there was an enemy to be faced. It was to be a losing fight for the rancher every time, but not before a large number of poverty-stricken homesteaders had paid the price of victory and had delayed the ranchers' defeat. The cattle chiefs and their cowboy troopers were slowly crowded back into limited bounds; until forced to surrender to the alternative of either becoming small farmers with mixed crops and a few milch cows or to pull up stakes and trek to new and unknown lands to the far north and west. Reaching the virgin territory they hoped to be able to rule for ten, fifteen, and perhaps twenty years, before the first prairie schooner of a homesteader, silhouetted again the waving skyline, sounded the bugle of battle.

Cay sighed. It was an old story now, this disheartening of new settlers, but a story left untold until it was too late to make amends. The homesteader felt that in his case, however, it *must* have been an accident. No rancher or *clique* of cattle men, being humane, could bring about such titanic destruction, misery, and tragedy. The stampede had, without doubt, brought about great loss to some rancher! And all to drive a few new settlers from the country? To Cay it was not a sound business policy.

Sky was the first to really appreciate the homesteader's plight.

Seated next to him he saw the fear in the man's glistening eyes. He took in at a glance the settler's

intelligence and strength of nerve. The cowboy recalled the doctors and lawyers, bankers and teachers, whom he had met on periodical trips to towns and cities. Cay was of that type. The soft white hands bore out the likeness in striking comparison to those of Sky's; sun-weathered, scarred, as hard as iron.

The puncher placed an arm about the man's shoulders in brotherly fashion.

"Mister Cay," started Sky, his voice deep was sympathetic. "This is a mighty hard blow, and words are empty things at a time like this." He moved his free arm back and forth; his great hand and outstretched fingers playing on the leaping flames as he indicated the tell-tale signs of destruction. "'Tis a blow below the belt—one that hurts mighty much. I know how you feel, 'cause I've seen many a good man feel the same way. You feel that it's goin' to hurt forever and forever. But it has come and gone. And reckon it won't happen again. You feel as if this—terrible accident, is the end! But, nary a bit of it! Sure has been a bad blow for an initiation, but 'tis the end of this sort—of crime."

The homesteader cleared his throat. He was about to interrupt, when Sky continued in his drawling fashion.

"I know you think you have nothin'—perhaps nothin' in the whole, wide world. Jes' because your lad is hurt, and your ploughin' steers, and wagon, and all—in fact, everythin' you brought along is gone. But—you're wrong, dead wrong! You have a wagon, and a brand new one it is! You have a

tent, an Indian teepee, and—by the holy thundas! You have two men to work for you till you git a-started again!"

Cay looked up curiously. He was puzzled.

"Yessir, Mister Homesteader. Over by the trail we, that is Ninga and yours truly, Sky Columbus Shipman, have a new wagon, a democrat, and a team. A pair of the finest creatures of horse-flesh that God ever roped this side of Eternity. And supplies? Gee gosh!" Sky patted Cay on the back in his enthusiasm. His eyes beamed with anxious delight. "Gee gosh—wait till you git your peepers on that chuck! Sech a round-up that would win the clutchin' hands of a dozen of the best broken-in cooks in the most particular ranches west of Heaven. And dry clothin', and boots? And—Mister Homesteader, Mister Partner, 'tis all yours."

Cay was about to put up his hands in protest, but Sky stood up. Calling to Ninga he suggested that they go to their camp and return with the team and new wagon as quickly as possible.

The homesteader was dumbfounded. He could not speak. He wanted to voice his thoughts but the words would not come. He wanted to say *something*. To express his gratitude at the unbelievable offer, but Sky was already on his way across the clearing.

Cay stepped over to where Ninga was seated. The cowboy was in deep thought as he watched the Indian working silently near the tent. Cay wanted to explain to Ninga how overwhelmed he was, but how impossible it was to accept the offer. Before

he had a chance to speak, however, the cowboy had started toward the Indian.

"What's your name—red feller, m' lad?" asked the puncher. "Reckon it should be 'Chief-Corn-on-the-Cob.'"

"Ugh, me? Name? Red Chicken—all time same!"

"Red? Chicken?—that's the name of chuck! I'll take a leg an' a slice of the breast," smiled Ninga.

"Ugh—all same Red Chicken."

"You—good injun? No heap bad—war-paint an' scalp, scalp? No fire-water? Are you—a *damn* good injun?"

"All the same Red Chicken. Ugh—good injun. All the same as white man cowboy chief."

"Well, that's not so good, but I smell a meal. I see it in the air. I'll gamble with you." Ninga fumbled in his pocket, "Here's a dollar, Red—Chicken. You work here one day. You go killem fatted calf. You go catchem one barrel wine, an' plenty bottle whiskey. An' you plenty clean 'em up. Chief Good White Cowboy come back soon—then make plenty powwow."

The cowpunchers, hatless and dishevelled, their wind-breakers and overalls torn in several places, passed over the hill and out of sight.

Within a few hours the scene of destruction and chaos was transformed to one of comparative orderliness, peace, and invitation. Red Chicken had removed much of the *débris* to the cover of a nearby bluff. He had stored the scattered provisions in repaired boxes, and had stacked the

broken equipment to one side to be inspected and appraised. He had strengthened the flapping and swaying tent by driving in additional pegs.

As the Indian worked, Cay and Dummy slept at the side of the fire, while Peter grazed leisurely near where its mistress rested.

Upon the return of the cowboys several hours later, with their team and the wagon loaded with equipment and supplies, both men expressed surprise and pleasure at Red Chicken's progress. They found in his accomplishments an incentive to make the campsite even more presentable.

The clearing soon resembled a far different place from the scene of disorder of a few hours previous. Under the Indian's direction the bedecked teepee was erected a short distance from where Valma slept. With the aid of the team of horses several of the carcasses of the slain cattle were hauled to an abandoned lime-kiln that would serve as a burial ground. Giving Red Chicken a few pointed instructions, the punchers rolled into their blankets near the teepee. Using their saddles as pillows they were soon asleep.

It was late afternoon before there was a sign of renewed activity. Valma was the first to awaken. Sitting on the cot she rubbed her eyes and gazed about nervously. Her sleep had been filled with pictures. First the terrifying sight of Darkness Jim and his wolf-hound, then the extended arm of Eric as he dangled the rope before her. Next came the puzzled expression of Dummy as he wondered if Eric was the person responsible for her injuries. The scenes at the homesteaders' camp, the stam-



pere, the mad ride on the steer, and the first glimpse of the clearing when she returned, all flashed past in chronological order; each bringing with it a gripping sensation, whether it was of fear, torture or death, or happy relief in the clasp of a saving hand. Each and every picture, as well as the impression, was so deeply imprinted on her mind that it seemed that they would be there forever and ever.

Now another picture was before her. Valma stood up and rubbed her eyes again. She wished to make sure that what she saw was not a part of her troubled dreams. There was an Indian sitting before a campfire. He was smoking a short, black pipe while he lazily poked the fire with a stick. Over the red hot embers to one side, supported on a branding iron, a whole carcass of some small beast was roasting. There was a torn and damaged tent, a teepee with its gay decorations of mystic birds and arrows, and two saddle beasts feeding at the side of a new wagon.

Valma closed her eyes for a few seconds in an attempt to familiarize the scene among the many that had been photographed on the sensitive negative of her mind. Now she gazed round again, taking in many details. Surely *not* Pryor clearing? It was all so different now! When she had ridden up the slope there had been a distressing sight of wreckage and tragedy. There had been a clouded sky, a threatening storm, rain, and more thunder, but now—there was orderliness and a spirit of a home and welcome. There was beautiful, mellow sunshine. The air was all balm and caress. Except for the horses striking their buckled halters against

the wagon and the occasional popping from the fire, there was a peaceful silence that was enchanting.

It was as if the hand of a gracious and understanding goddess had suddenly waved a magic wand to command sleep, and then, with a following gesture, had transposed the scene from one of maelstrom to a setting of charm, fascination, and contentment; to awaken, with a valedictory flourish, to a new realization of peace and tranquillity.

"Peter!" Valma called, almost without thought.

Immediately, the animal, half-sleeping in the shade of the teepee, cocked its head to one side and walked slowly to her.

The action aroused Red Chicken from his reverie.

He stood up and looked at the girl.

"Oh, Ruddy—what are you doin' here? Where's everybody? Is anyone hurt?" Valma queried as she recognized the Indian. He had often worked at Pine Needle. Incidentally, he was one of the best known in the hundred and twelve on Day Star Reserve. The girl recalled the several misnomers the punchers had given to the man, all of which he answered to good-naturedly. Among the most popular were "Chief Red-Rooster," "Good-Black-Fowl," and "Brave-Chief-Chicken-No-Feathers."

By early evening the campsite was a hive of activity.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### WHEN A MAN'S A MAN

From the second that Valma jumped from the cot she was busy. First, she made sure that Eric was not seriously injured. With Dummy she examined the homesteader's leg. They tried to alleviate his suffering.

The girl was thankful at heart for the knowledge gained from treating her pets that had suffered minor mishaps from time to time. Or rather, she reflected, the hurt and battle-scarred creatures had not become pets until she had been happy in sufficient experience to patch broken wings, wrenched legs, and the many other wounds that had by some strange force brought the wanderers to within her circle of care. She was enthused as she realized that it was really a *man* she was trying to patch up and help. Heretofore, it had been a tiny, furry leg that would not set the same as the others, or an ugly scratch that would not heal without much patient, tender nursing, and several applications of this liniment and that lotion. She certainly never thought she would be called upon to puzzle how to mend a *person*. After all, she theorized, the teaching and experience that had come to her through helping crippled animals and birds might have been just a training in itself for such an emergency. The men at Pine Needle had once called her "Doctor."

She laughed as she pictured them, especially False. If he could see her massaging and bandaging the settler's bruised and twisted leg she would most assuredly merit the title, thought Valma smilingly.

"That smile is better than all the medicine in the world," declared Eric, as he watched the girl's set and serious expression change to a happy, natural smile.

To assist Red Chicken to prepare a meal was the next job. Once again Valma was thankful; she blessed Snowflake for the many opportunities to help about the cabin.

While the girl and the redskin busied themselves at the fireside, Dummy searched nearby bluffs and adjacent clearings in an effort to find some clue that would assist him to run down the party or parties responsible for the tragedy of the previous night, as well as the several similar disasters that had occurred during the past few months.

Cay and Sky, refreshed by their sleep, took stock of the supplies that the cowboys had so generously contributed; the homesteader profuse in thanks. The tall benefactor, however, waved aside the words of gratitude, mumbling about the true spirit of the West being to help a newcomer. Solaced by the long view—life had imbued the puncher with the philosophy which leads one to bend to events, rather than to be broken by them. Life had taught him that it is disastrous to be at the mercy of a thing that one wants. If you desire a thing so that you cannot wait and work for it comfortably, the thing you want is stronger than you are, and you are not ready to have it. One must be stronger

than money to get any good out of it; must be stronger than any desire, or the "kick-back" in getting it is deadly, was the man's philosophic contention.

Ninga was the last to awaken.

From the folds of his blanket he glanced round vacantly. Through a sleepy haze he presently made out the fire and the figure of Red Chicken supervising the roasting carcass. His nose twitched pleasingly as he caught the aroma. He stood up. Walking across the clearing he stopped at the Indian's side.

"Oh—Chief-Hole-in-Your-Pants, Red Feller, m' lad!" The puncher yawned as he studied the meat sizzling and popping over the blazing embers. "Red feller, good injun, m' lad. What you got there?" he bristled curiously as he smacked his lips.

The Indian was meditative:

"Ugh! Cowboy say go catch—fat calf! I go where tall trees make cool shadows. I go where sweet grass of peavine grow long an' plenty deep. I go where Great Spirit Nokomis of skies blow wind from calf to good injun. Great Spirit Nokomis hear prayer of his child, Red Chicken. Great Spirit Nokomis send fat calf to give good white man plenty meat."

"Yessir, Chief-Good-Talk! That's right! Chief good cowboy say git fatted calf, an'—" Ninga looked around anxiously. He showed great surprise in his expression. "An' I say git barrel of wine. Rich, red, wine, an' heap plenty bottle whiskey. What did the—Great Spirit Nokomis say—'bout that order?"

"No fire-water," grunted the Indian. "No catch 'em fire-water on prairie. Must go trail—many days ride on trail with wagon. Indian no got Great Spirit for fire-water—heap bad spirit," was the satirical conclusion.

Supper prepared, Red Chicken was about to beat a summons on the bottom of a pan when a rustling in the bluffs to the north arrested the attention of the punchers. There was a stillness as the men listened. The occulting *crunch, crunch* of some person walking on the dried twigs and leaves reached their ears.

There was a dread feeling of alarm!

The tragic incidents of the past had stormed against their nerves and energy; a premonition of further danger suddenly recalled the high tension of watchfulness and constant preparedness that all hoped was now a battle of the past.

"A man's step," proffered Sky in a whisper. He attempted to peer between the trees and leafy branches of the bluff.

"Quick! There he is! An Indian!" shouted the puncher rushing forward. In a second the figure was swallowed up in the cover of the bush. Simultaneously, there was a shot, then the sound of hurrying footsteps as two persons raced through the thick foliage.

No sooner had the shot been fired than Dummy was following Sky. Ninga and Cay ran to the wagon for firearms. Valma jumped onto Peter and joined in the chase.

Presently, Sky and Dummy returned. The man

had escaped. The tall puncher had been hit in the left arm. The wound was a superficial one.

"An Indian? Kind-o'-strangel" drawled Sky as he stood by the fire and dabbed a wet handkerchief where the bullet had pierced the flesh. He looked curiously across and studied the face of Red Chicken.

The redskin felt his gaze. He stared into the eyes of the cowboy with an expression of sympathy and determination.

"Indian—friend of white man—always! As long as sun shine Indian help—protect white brother. Man in bush *not* Indian! White man know that white man plenty enemy of white man. White man rancher make plenty trouble for new settler—all time! Blame Indian all time. Great White Father watch over Indian same as white man. Big White Chief know Indian is brother of white man—all time!" There was a note of pathos and deep sincerity in the man's solemn declaration.

"I saw the critter, an' he looked—*like* an Indian. P'haps he was sure 'nough a white man, a-hopin' to blame—"

A spirited neigh from Peter, as the creature pricked its ears in the direction of Pine Needle, interrupted Sky's verdict.

"Look! There's a man—now!" shouted Ninga. He pointed to a man on horseback at the top of the short slope.

"That's Pop!" hailed Valma, gleefully, rushing to meet him.

The man dismounted and caressed the child affectionately. With his arm about her he started for-

ward. Four other riders from Pine Needle rode over the brow of the hill. They drew up at the fire.

Striking in physique, square jaw, steel blue eyes, Norman Killdare, better known as "Jawl," was a dominant and impressive power in Touchwood Hills. One of the best known cattle kings in the country he was beloved by all who met him. The number of those whom he had befriended ran into the hundreds. There was not a single new settler who had journeyed within the precincts of his domain who had not good cause to bless the mention of the man's name. Genial and whole-hearted hospitality, an anxious desire to gain and to hold full confidence and goodwill, and generous beyond belief in the gifts of steers, equipment and food, the name of Jawl Killdare was one spoken of with greatest respect and admiration from range to range; on till the very edge of the fertile hills and plains was reached.

Taciturn always, he would occasionally extol and applaud the newcomers. He admired them for their indomitable courage. Brazing unknown perils, they crossed the prairies to build new homes in the unplowed lands. Wolves and rustlers and fire often beset them, but they pushed on undaunted and unafraid; each one contributing a link in the foundation of a new order of things and a new empire.

On the other hand, there was only one man who sincerely knew the real Norman Killdare—that man was Jawl himself. Lonely and aloof, seeking no help or sympathy from any man, appealing to no one in time of stress and strife, he was a lion



inasmuch as he would be alone. Wolves hunt in packs but a lion goes alone. He was, indeed, a lion; in the business of ranching, in true-hearted friendship, and in every other cause for the love of brotherhood. It was often said that whatever belonged to Jawl belonged to any man who had use of its service; next to giving one's life for a fellow-being—*greater love hath no man!*

"We've been lookin' for Valma, an' were worried. We knew that Dummy was searching, an' knew that he would take good care that no harm came to her," explained the man after a general introduction by the girl.

Glancing over the clearing and into the distance, Jawl gazed at the carcasses of cattle. For a second there was a tinge of pain in his expression as he realized the injustice and tragedy of the stampede. The next instant, however, his thoughts were for the homesteaders and the cowboys. He invited them all to pack up and to drive to Pine Needle—to be his guests until Eric had recovered, and Cay and the punchers were thoroughly rested. He instructed two of his riders to remain behind with the Indian to take care of the camp.

After a hasty meal, Sky and Ninga hitched their team to the new wagon. Making Eric as comfortable as possible, all set off toward Pine Needle.

Night had now set in. Overhead a brilliant moon and the planet Mercury was keeping watch while Jupiter was setting on the eastern borders of Aries. Ninga, riding beside Eric, gazed to the star-flecked canopy. Presently, he reached beneath the seat. He took out a violin and bow from a worn

case. Fingering the strings fondly to assure their correct tone, he looked up at Sky, seated beside Cay on the seat. He commenced to play "My Hero." After a few bars he broke off and swung into the staccato melody of "Me and the Man in the Moon."

The cowboys and the Indian, standing at the edge of Pryor clearing, watched the procession in silence. A blood-red sun peeped from behind the clouds for a few seconds; giving to the riders and their spirited horses, a striking and picturesque setting; ere it was gradually blotted out in the curtain of deepening purple.

Presently, the strains of a haunting melody, and the harmony of Sky's deep voice, faded into the distance as the edge of Black Forest was skirted on the way to Pine Needle.

## CHAPTER XXV

### WHEN THE GODS ANSWER

The tear-dimmed, anxious eyes of Snowflake watched hopefully from the cabin of Pine Needle for a sign of Valma. From early that morning the woman had been at the doorway every little while; scanning as far along the trail as a cedar bluff three hundred yards away would allow, then in every other direction; straining her ears for the child's usual "Yoo—hoo!" salutation.

With the men searching the ranges, Snowflake felt confident that the girl would soon be found. She was relieved in the thought that once in their care the child would have every possible loving care.

The girl was everything and all that the woman held dear in life. The hills and valleys and entire beautiful scenery of Touchwood Hills was as a fitting background. Without Valma there would be no beauty, love, spirit of harmony and grandeur, courage and true comradeship. This spirit of love seemed to be in the air which the woman breathed. From time to time Snowflake would return inside the cabin to continue her duties, but it was always with a heavy heart, and an ill-brooding depression that sorely taxed to the bounds of a nervous collapse.

As she gazed expectantly on this occasion, a few of the punchers were seated about the clearing

while others stood near the cabin in readiness for the summons to the evening meal. They knew too well to banter cheerfully, or to have any fun whatsoever, at the expense of the southerner at such a serious time. They, too, were depressed by the absence of Valma; alarmed at the possibility of her being in danger. The men's love for the girl was equally as profound as Snowflake's. Everyone at the ranch was ready to suffer privation if it would in any way save the girl from harm or hurt.

"Good Lawd—Almighty! Ah be sartainly much 'bliged ef yo' send mah l'le angel back t' me. Yas-suh! Lawd. Ah'm waitin' fo' yo' merciful supplication. Ah'm sho' t' be—nacherly good fo' evah an' evah—ef yo' brin' back mah child Mis' Valma." Snowflake unconsciously looked to the moon-swept, star-pointed heavens, as she prayed beneath her breath.

Her ears caught the low rumbling of a wagon! She thought she heard voices and music along the trail. The tingling of melody came as waves of vibrant and impelling influence. Her eyes brightened instantly. Her expression beamed in happy anticipation. In the moonlight she caught a glimpse of Valma on Peter. It was like a flutter of a silver wing at the far end of a fairy garden; having a dynamic, inspiring, spiritual power. A new light wavered over the woman's face.

"Good Lawd! Good Lawd! Yo' done answe'ed mah p'ayah. Sho' yo' done brought mah l'le, beautiful, com-panion back t' me. Merciful Father dat yo' is! Yas-suh! Nothin' else but!" The words were shouted in proud exultation.

The men looked at Snowflake. They were in a quandary.

False was about to venture a sympathetic remark when he heard the riders and the wagon as the procession rounded the turn in the trail.

As the horsemen caught sight of the lights of Pine Needle they gave a full-throated cheer that echoed to the hills and valleys beyond. The home-comers at once allowed their beasts to break into a spirited, anxious gait.

After the first shout there was a comparative silence, a supreme stillness. Then Valma's whimsical greeting was heard.

Instantly, pandemonium broke loose. The cowboys at the ranch cheered and yelled; vying for the greater exultation with those riding home. Snowflake returned within the cabin to be out of sight while she dried her tears; ere she clutched the child to her bosom in glorifying welcome.

Reaching the cabin, Valma, Jawl, Dummy, and the two cowboys dismounted. Willing hands were ready to carry Eric inside to the comfort of an old-fashioned armchair near the stove. Two of the men unhitched the team.

Almost immediately, Valma was on her way hurriedly to God's Five Acres.

She stopped breathlessly at the gate. Her domain never appeared so gorgeous and enchanting. She stood spellbound in the fascination. The clearing, bathed in the soft, mellow glow of silver instead of the sun gold was almost as bright as day. The carpet of crimson and purple chicory that extended to the water's edge at the far end had now

taken on a deeper, inviting, majestic richness; thick as the weave of a kingly rug. The column of crystal water that splashed and gurgled down the temple of rocks to the shimmering surface of Mirror Lake glistened silver in the moonlight. It was as if some giant's unseen hand was spilling a continuous stream of precious brilliants into a cup of flowing silver. The white-washed log building—Valma's own cabin—the low-paling fence that bordered the many varieties of multi-colored flowers, and the house of the pets, beyond the cabin, stood out in bold relief against the dark background. The gap at the southwest corner, the gateway that looked out and down to the valley, appeared as a doorway of black; the door to night itself.

"Yoo—hoo!" Valma called quietly as she pictured her companions in deep slumber. There was Flight-Commander with his head tucked beneath a cosy, warm wing. King would be in his stall. He would, let's see—he was always a loafer, and just had to hold up the side of the cabin when he rested. Blacky? Yes, she would be as dignified as a lamb should be. She was probably huddled in her own corner as spick and span as a brand new baby chick. Then Tweekey? Still wrapped in the piece of flannel, snuggled on the floor of the canary cage. Perhaps a curious and scared eye peeped from the warm folds of the blanket; wondering about the donkey, the goose, and the lamb. They were, indeed, strange bed-fellows. The wounded badger? It would be resting comfortably beneath her own

bed. She recalled she had put it into a large box.

Valma would have liked to have caressed them all good-night. Just to let them know that she had returned to them. To promise that she would not leave them again—never! On second thoughts, she realized that Snowflake had been taking good care of them. The woman would have assuredly tucked them away to slumber with a crooning lullaby as if they had been a bunch of tired and sleepy, but happy piccaninnies.

"Yoo—hoo!" The call was not more than a whisper.

There was an unnatural gurgling sound at the end of the clearing. Then a quiet, familiar "Ya-honk." Almost as soon as Valma had repeated her quiet call, Flight-Commander was at her feet. In its beak it carried a long, wriggling woolly worm.

"Mister Flight-Commander Gander!" The girl's words held a kindly reprimand. "Out lookin' for the *late* worm? An' you've got him! That l'le feller must feel like the end of the world. Don't believe that story I told you 'bout the early bird catches the first worm? No, you're jes' one lap—an' a big, woolly worm—ahead of the early birds. Now away to your roost, an' I'll see that you have a nice breakfast of leavin's—good an' early!"

The goose nestled closer to her feet. It brushed its body against her legs. It threw up its head proudly; allowing the worm to wriggle vigorously in front of the girl.

"Go 'long, an' take your feed with you." She reached down, patting the bird affectionately. "I'm

hungry, but I'm not havin' worms for supper to-night. Thanks—very much!"

Valma passed through the gateway and ran to join the cowboys and the newcomers.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE TIE THAT BINDS

At the door of the cabin the pup, "Crash," and the two kittens were playing. Valma was about to stroke and to step over the trio when she noticed the leg of a tiny dog protruding from beneath the furry mass of kittens. It was a leg of a Mexican hairless toy terrier, full grown, but its body scarcely more than four inches in length. At touch of the girl's hands the kittens scampered away uncovering the dwarf that apparently had been getting the worst of an unfair and one-sided attack. The mite barked a snappy yelp in gratitude, while the long-legged pup attempted to turn the creature over with its nose.

Valma picked up the new pet. She enquired from whence it came. It was so small that the child could easily hold it on her hand without fear of it over-balancing. Snowflake told her the dog's name was "Hash Unlimited," and that Father Devine had left it as a midsummer present. The woman explained that it was continually getting lost. There was a note of alarm in her voice as she related a distressing episode of the animal once being given up for good. With the negro's racial obsession of an insatiable penchant for imposing words she concluded with a solemn warning and a gloomy prediction:

“ ‘Pears to me—dat l’le bite of a dawg sho’ gwine to be sartainly—accidentally ’liminated froh rightful libin’! An’—ah doan mean mebbe! Ah specherly knowed ev’ythin’ done gone wrong dat mawnin’ when dat disgracement o’ a dawg arrived, ’cause ah puts mah right stockin’ on mah lef’ foot. Yas-sah!—an’ nos-suh! Dat l’le feller, hound o’ a dawg’s worstest enemy—is sure doomed! Gwine to be jes’ nacherly swallowed up, or specherly terminated undah one of duh boy’s cigarette papers. Uh-huh, Mis’ Valma—ah sho’ must allocate plenty o’ prayahs fo’ dat weeny fellah—ef he ’spects to libe an’ libe lik’ us folks.”

Valma nodded approval.

Jumping up the steps, still clutching the toy terrier, she was about to help Snowflake to serve supper when just as the cowboys were being seated one of them imitated the bark of a dog. Immediately, another of the men started barking pitifully. Instantly, there was general amusement and a spirit of great joviality; the laughing and chaffing almost drowning the cries of the cowboy who was the center of attention.

Fingers were pointed at “Callagain” Preacher, a puncher who suffered from a strange mental malady. If a person caught him unawares and suddenly imitated a dog’s bark he would at once become the victim of a mental reflex, and commence to yelp. It was a pitiful affliction, but one that his good-natured companions occasionally took advantage of amusingly.

But now life held an added, awesome horror for Callagain.

Since the arrival of Hash Unlimited, he was in abject terror of the creature every time it was lost. A great tragedy was pending, and he, Callagain Preacher, was to be the victim of the grim, uncanny circumstances. Not until that tiny dog was found and held up in full view of verification did he recover from the horror of a prediction that his mind consistently harbored. It was often hours before the animal was found. It was lost and found so many times that it was generally considered that the pet thought its only role in life at the ranch was to be chief character in a continual game of "hide-an-go-seek."

It was during these periods that the cowboy suffered most. From his birth—so it seemed—he had detested meat pies, and especially individual meat pies. It so happened that with Snowflake, and the majority of the punchers, meat pies, and especially individual meat pies, were one of the greatest delicacies of Pine Needle. But with Callagain no one could foretell, not even the mystic prophets themselves, what a crisp covering of flakey crust could hide. No one, except Callagain could imagine just what might escape to the inner precincts of the pie under the disguise or pretense of meat.

The barking of the man alarmed Hash Unlimited. Perhaps it was a cue for the animal to hide for playful men to seek. Suddenly the tiny creature jumped clear from Valma's hand onto a table where Snowflake was putting the finishing touches to extra meat pies for the unexpected guests.

The dog disappeared as if it had gone up in smoke.

A few of the men glanced round in a perfunctory effort to find the pet, but when it would not divulge its hiding place by giving a quiet, encouraging yelp, perhaps to bark "hot," "hotter," or "red hot," they turned their attention to the steaming food.

The voice of Valma held their attention.

"While you folks are eatin', I'm goin' to introduce—formally—the new folks with us," she announced, as she finished placing Cay, Ninga, and Sky between the men of the ranch. "No—better still," she corrected, "I'm goin' to introduce the boys of Pine Needle, while our guests keep on eatin'."

Snowflake started serving the meat pies, first to the newcomers, then along the row of happy, care-free cowboys.

"First I want to tell Mister Cay, an' Mister Sky, an' Mister Eric, an' Mister Ninga, that ev'yone of the boys—these gentlemen of the cows—has some accomplishment. That is—they are on their way to do somethin' big. To soon do, a big job—a manly big job! A—"

"Like washin' an elephant!" shouted False at the far end of the table.

There was an outburst of merriment.

"Now Phillip there, is a ven—tri—quist," continued Valma, ignoring the interruption. "Phil can send his voice under the table, an' away over his shoulder, an' ev'ywhere, jes' like he's not speakin' himself. Jes' like an echo. He's been practicin' for a long time now, but he's got promise. Stand up Phil, an' bow, like the real ventriloquistesses do.

Gee—whitterkins! That's a hard word to talk."

The man stood up and bowed.

"Don't need to give an exhibition, or what you call a per-formance," added Valma. "After supper we—"

From somewhere at the back of the stove a stentorian voice—threatening and commanding—was heard throughout the cabin:

"I'm the ghost of red-horned, fire-eyed Jerry—the monkey-chaser! Look-er-out! Boo! Scats! I'll git you yet!"

There was a rattling and scattering of pots and pans. All eyes were turned to Snowflake at the side of the stove.

"Lawsy! Lawsy!" she screamed, her eyes showing big patches of white, "ef yo' doan stop dat foolin', an' a-scarin' honest folks doin' honest-an-law-bidin' bisness wid yo' fool voice, ah sho' jump right atop yo' fool head! Sho' an mah mouf speakin' words, ah!—ah!—" She was too excited to finish her admonishment. She pointed a long cooking-fork at Phillip to enforce her unspoken thoughts.

Her words of warning and actions were lost, however, in unanimous enjoyment.

"Then—there's Walter. He's better known as the 'Professor,'" explained Valma. "We call him 'Professor,' 'cause he's learnin' to do tricks, an' jugglin'. An' he can hyp—hyp—tize animals, an' birds—an' lady bugs. An'—he has a secret, magic cure for monkey-bites—"

"But who's goin' to get bitten by a pesky monkey to try the cure?" queried one of the punchers.

There was a chorus of hearty laughs and much slapping of backs around the table. "Naw! Nix on that! Tell us how to live for a hundred years—even if we die in the attempt," counselled the interrupter.

"Waal, now—thar's l'le Lucy, Missus Cotton Picker Snowstorm! When she gits back to home—p'raps, they'll bit her with joy," added another cowboy.

After the new outburst of hilarity had quieted somewhat, Valma continued:

"As I was sayin', the Professor is full of magic. Can even fry eggs on a cake of ice, an' shake the tallest towers on earth, an'—"

"Can he call heads and tails ev'y time?" asked Ninga, joining in the repartee.

Once again Valma took up the story.

"Yes-sir, the Professor is chock full of magic, an'—can find things in places you don't expect. Stand up, Professor."

Across the table a medium-height, dignified cowboy rose.

"Say, Perfesser, can you find, or brin' back to life—dead or alive—our pet dawg, Hash Unlimited?" called False.

"Naw! Naw—Gawd bli' me! 'Old 'ard an' stand by," interrupted another of the men. "Let's find t' bloomin' tyke hourselves, an' Mom, arsk t' Perfessor to brin' forth a new saxophoney trumpet, an' let's all larf like a sack of monkeys. An' wot 'bout findin' a bally pack o' cards down Snowdrift's neck, or in 'er Mississippi top-knot? That'd be

wurth a couple o' quid, two bob, an' a tanner of hennybody's money."

The tapping of Valma's knife handle on the table broke up the volley of laughs, endorsements and additional requests for various articles; ranging from a new bridle to a swarm of bees, to be discovered in Dummy's supper or on the portly personage of Snowflake.

The girl continued:

"Then there's Gerd. We call 'im 'Bag-o'-wheels,' 'cause if you were to open his head you would find all wheels, an' works, jes' like a clock. The boys say that when he was born he was a spirit of a mec—chanic. An' there's Garibaldi, from Italy, an' then comes 'Eater-great-ski.' He's from Russia, but he left-handed, an' that's why he has to sit all alone at the end—'cause he's so left-handed that he always tries to eat the next fellow's dinner as well as his own. An' next is Keewee. Jes'—plain Keewee. You see Keewee is short, an' thin like a shadow. When he first came to Pine Needle one of the boys said that an empty buggy drove up an' Keewee got out."

"An' now he's in an empty shirt," False added.

"Keewee is goin' to take up flyin', so he says. He's got a wishbone as well as a backbone. I've never seen a train, must less an aero—o—plane. Well Keewee is workin' with Gerd, who's tryin' to invent a new flyin' machine. They hope to finish it some day soon, an' then Keewee is goin' to look down on them all. Yes-sir, he's small, but he's busy an' always active. An'—"

"Well, remember, a bird in the hand makes Jack a dull boy!" chimed Ninga.

"Then comes 'Mademoiselle Calliope.' He's from Montreal, an' makes up poetry. Folks do say he's real good an' smart at inventin' songs. An' across at the far corner is—"

The cowboy referred to as Calliope stood up.

*"Ze cowboy catch zee leetle bee-e!  
Ze tousand bees—he catch zee cowboy,  
Whoopee-e-e-s!"*

Suddenly, False barked behind Callagain. The man started to yelp again. The next instant Phillip threw his voice, imitating a short, snappy yelp, right into the middle of Callagain's pie; just as the cowboy was about to lift out a generous helping. An expression of horror came to his face.

Dropping his spoon and fork he was about to rush from the table when False placed a hand on his shoulder, forcing him to remain seated.

Phillip sent several more barks to the pie.

"I knew it, I knew it!" cried Callagain with alarm. "I knew it would happen, jes' as soon as that two-ounce dawg loped to this shack. But why? I ask, why pick on me?" he panted breathlessly.

"Ladies an' gentlemen." A heavy, dignified voice was heard above the laughter of the cowboys and the protests of Callagain. The Professor was on his feet. With a solemn expression he raised his hands as he addressed his audience. He proceeded to draw up the sleeves of his windbreaker in true professional mein.



"Ladies—an'—gentle—men, yo' are now 'bout to see—I mean witness, one of the greatest, rarest, hair-raisin', distinctive tricks of mystery—"

"Naw!—you mean misery, not mystery!" corrected False.

Injured dignity clouded the Professor's face as he glanced at the clown cowboy. After a few seconds he continued: "One of the most distinctive tricks of misery—no, no, mystery ever performed before a distinction audience. A trick that has baffled the world, an' Pine Needle. Watch closely! The closer you watch the less you see!"

He stretched his arms across the corner of the table, directly above Callagain's unfinished meal.

"Yumma—sambo—an'—*presto!*" The Professor almost touched Callagain's pie in his enthusiasm. He made a few, quick flourishes. Suddenly there appeared in the Professor's hands the hairless, wriggling, yelping form of Hash Unlimited. In the animal's mouth was a piece of pie crust.

There was a fleeting figure across the cabin . . . a slam of the screen door . . . and Callagain had disappeared into the darkness of the night.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### FALSE WORRIES A BEAR

Glorious summer days of June and July and August passed away, and September in Touchwood Hills brought the autumnal beauty of enchantment and fascination that comes with Nature's masterpiece of colorful artistry. The tall, majestic pines, spruce, cedars, and other evergreens appeared to take on a deeper harmony of richness, while the poplars, maples, and cottonwoods, commenced to gently drop their gorgeous rain of scarlet, orange, and gold; carpeting, here and there, the fading green of the foothills with a resplendence that breathed a new spirit of Nature's sleep in readiness for a greater and more glorious awakening.

All through the long morning of this September day, Valma helped Snowflake with her work; sweeping and tidying the eating and living rooms, preparing a lunch for the few punchers working close to the ranch buildings.

And as she helped she sang; wild, wordless melodies in a natural, childish voice, but as harmonious as a harp. Valma's voice was one of the wonders of Touchwood Hills. Many a time, riders from distant ranches dropped in to pay their respects to Jawl and their compliments to the girl, asking her to sing. Cowboys of Pine Needle, homeward bound after a day's riding, had often stopped

in their tracks that they might perchance catch the golden music of her voice. At night, after the evening meal was over and chores were finished, they would ask her to sing the songs they had taught her.

So during the morning she sang because she was happy. Why, she did not know. Perhaps it was because by singing she dismissed a sense of gravity that tried to disturb her. She wanted to force it from her thoughts. Perhaps she was happy because the sun was shining brightly and the wine of life was in the air. The sun itself seemed imbued with the glorious spirit. Its rays shone in the child's tawny hair where the curls made waves and ringlets. It shone in the girl's eyes, faithfully reflecting the blue skies of the foothill ranges.

But the haunting gloom came back. It would not be totally dismissed. It demanded a hearing. The past few weeks had been fraught with many distressing episodes; often to border on the tragic.

Valma, seated on the cabin step, oiling a bridle and burnishing the bit, stopped for a few moments. Her resistance gone, her voice now quiet, she reluctantly gave way. To her mind came pictures of a few of the strange, uncanny and weird incidents that had happened recently.

There had been mysterious prairie fires, always dangerously close to a homesteader's shack. On two occasions the new settlers had actually been burned out. Pop had, however, taken good care of the unfortunate people. There had been another stampede, in which three families had lost their entire crops, and had suffered irreparable damage

to their homes; so often a settler's last defense against overwhelming misfortune.

And the wolves! They were becoming more venturesome and ferocious each day. They daringly roamed the hills by night and the valleys by day, attacking calves, and often cows and bulls. Skilled trappers sought the packs. Government hunters trailed them, but the wily beasts always outsmarted the men and dogs. Once a large pack had threatened to attack a homesteader. Had approached dangerously near to him when he tried to save his chickens and ducks and geese. Terrible big fellows of wolves, too! Must be as terrible as Darkness Jim's wolf-hound.

But Pop was doing ever so much to help the sufferers, consoled Valma, as she breathed on the polished bit and gave it an energetic rubbing. "Geel—won't Peter be proud of that—clean, sparklin' bridle?" She held up the finished work appraisingly. Now the phantom of tragedy, having been given its demanding attention, eased its command. The girl started to hum quietly.

And Cay was now a regular farmer . . . Eric was better, but still limping . . . Sky and Ninga were building a house on their homesteads in readiness for Mrs. Ninga and—one, no two sets of twins . . . each two faces alike, and perhaps their chubby bodies dressed exactly alike, but one set older than the other . . . just like four peas in a pod . . . at one end two small peas, at the other end two larger peas.

And Cay was doing much good work for the new homesteaders.

As a settler who had suffered misfortune he was determined to put an end to the dangerous fires, terrifying stampedes, and other scarings. One day he gathered all the homesteaders together in the new, log schoolhouse. All vowed to work hard—in an association—to protect and to help new settlers, and most certainly to put a finish to the trouble-makers, like Darkness Jim. There had been other meetings. Pop and Dummy had attended. They had promised to help. Sometimes a mounted policeman, in smart red tunic and yellow braid down his breeches, was there also. It was his duty to round-up the men who were trying to drive the new settlers out of the foothills. Cay had been elected Chairman of the new association.

"Gee—I hope ev'ythin' is all over now, an' there won't be any more stampedes, an' shootin's, an' forest fires, or any other trouble!" The girl spoke her wish aloud.

The excited chattering of a squirrel reached her ears.

"Ha, ha—there's a bag o' trouble—right *now!*" she exclaimed.

Hanging the bridle at the side of the door she hurried through the bluff at the rear of the cabin. She cautiously made her way to where a pine squirrel scampered back and forth along a branch. It was scolding vehemently. Curious to see what was annoying the creature, Valma walked slowly and carefully so as not to disturb it.

Directed by the plaintive cries, the girl peeped over a knoll. Immediately, she felt rooted to the ground as she caught sight of a large, black bear.

She was alarmed. Very slowly and very quietly she retraced her steps. She intended to run as fast as she could to the safety of the cabin, but gaining a short distance her courage returned with her curiosity. She stopped. Stepping behind a tree she watched the couple.

The squirrel had been cutting and trimming cones to store away for the winter. Apparently, the bear was lying on the pile that the squirrel had thrown down from the tree.

The tiny fighter was very angry. Racing to the end of a long limb, it jumped about wildly in its agitation. Its sparkling, white-rimmed eyes were blazing. Its chatter could be heard throughout the bluff. The bear had found two logs, one fallen across the other, forming a "v." The animal was lying on its back in the "v," its shoulders in the apex of the logs, scratching itself.

Presently it yawned, got to its feet and shook its thick, glossy coat. Apparently relieved, it sauntered away a few paces. Immediately, the squirrel jumped from limb to limb. Reaching the ground it examined the pile of cones to see if any were missing. While checking up, it chattered intermittently; telling the world what it thought of bears in general, and one in particular.

Valma turned. False, with a rifle at his shoulder, was a short distance from her. He motioned her to keep perfectly still. There was a keen expression of humor in his eyes.

The bear was now standing on its hind legs, reaching up at a choke-cherry bush. Suddenly, there was a singing "buzz-z-z" as a bullet passed directly

in front of the animal's nose. It shook its head violently, and then continued to search among the leaves for berries. There was another "buzz-z-z." Again the creature shook its head in protest. When the third "buzz-z-z" came dangerously nearer, the bear jumped back and then hurried off through the bluff; the buzzing of an imaginary bee still singing in its ears.

Returning to God's Five Acres, Valma spent much time with her pets. Chanting her happy songs she toiled among the exquisite flowers at the side of her cabin. As she dug up the occasional weed, Flight-Commander was ever ready with an eager eye in case a woolly worm should unconsciously show itself, while Blacky nosed each discarded plant in the hope that it was a tasty morsel.

Later, Valma caught Peter. Taking great pride in putting on the polished bridle she started off to the Pryor homesite to help Eric plant a flower garden.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### CLARIONS OF WAR

As Valma arrived at the Pryor campsite, Dummy, Cay, and Sky, were mounting their saddle-beasts. A report that two homesteaders, beyond Kutawa canyon, had been attacked and injured, and that a prairie fire was sweeping toward their stacked crops, prompted Cay to go and help the unfortunate men. Red Chicken, seated by the campfire, was panting breathlessly from the run of several miles to advise the aged settler.

Eric greeted Valma. After chatting with her for a few minutes the three men disappeared along a leafy bridle-path that led through the bluffs.

Toward evening the riders reached the canyon. As twilight began to gather they cautiously rode along the precipitous edge, hoping to reach a crossing place, and thence to their destination on their mission of mercy, before dark.

They passed the place where Valma had narrowly escaped death. From their saddles they could not see the ledge where Eric had found the girl, but they saw the tips of the stunted poplars, now almost bare of leaves, through the branches of which the homesteader had caught his first glimpse of the child.

Now the travellers were nearing the falls and rapids.



The booming of the racing stream as the volume crashed to the rocks below and the thundering of the rapids ere they were engulfed in the swirling whirlpools, fascinated the men. They became conscious of a magnetism, a beckoning challenge to master the tempestuous current that called for man's greatest in strength, endurance, and bravery.

Sky recalled having hearing that no man had ever swam the river at this point and lived to tell the story. The Indians, when they related in proud and admiring tone two attempts of courageous men, always concluded with a whisper, awed and poignant.

The cowboy felt an urge to accept the challenge. It would be a conquest of which to be proud for ever and ever.

Now they were passing the boiling torrents that had sent the self-same spirit to Darkness Jim. There, beyond mid-stream, dangerously near the brink where the placid waters were swept from sight, was the broken reef with its submerged boulders that had tripped the outcast. At that point Cassius had saved its master from the fate that records claimed awaited all who dare accept the challenge.

The gathering darkness and the rocks of the ridge began to make progress a strenuous task for the animals, and when "Pirate," Sky's horse, continued to show signs of fatigue the man suggested that it would be wise to camp until dawn.

Arriving at a narrow break in a ridge that led off from the stream, Dummy observed a dilapi-

dated cabin through the bare branches of the poplars and maples.

"Looks as if Ol' Man 'Death squatted here, an' died of slow living'," declared Sky, leading the way through the trees and underbrush. "Come to rec'llect, by thundas, I heard tell of sech a Hell's Gap as this, 'way 'long the trail, but figure even a lousy grizzly wouldn't stay long 'nough to flash a whisker. It will do us until dawn," he assured dismounting.

The puncher did not realize the discredit of his last remark.

They led the horses to a shelter at the edge of a bluff, then made their way to the cabin. The door was fastened with bent, rusted nails. Under the weight of Sky's shoulder it gave way. A few weeds were growing inside; struggling for light and air between the broken floorboards. Dummy struck a match. Holding it above his head he surveyed the interior of the shack. Observing a lantern behind the door, Cay shook it to ascertain its oil supply. He handed it to Dummy. The light of the match flickered when applied to the frayed wick. A second later the light sent its dim rays across the cabin.

In the middle of the room a rough table was littered with old magazines and water-soiled books and papers. By the barricaded window a camp bed was covered with a torn Navajo blanket. In the far corner a small stove was propped on four log ends. Chipped and rusted cooking utensils were scattered about the floor. A broken kitchen chair completed the furnishings.

"Nothin' much!" mused the puncher, as he con-

tinued to appraise the contents of the shack. "Ol' Man Death was sure a cuss—must have camped here with a bunch of Crees till he missed his lick, an' then jes' naturally whizzed away without as much as leavin' a visitin' card." He laughed. "Reckon he's a-tellin' the angel folk that he darsent live alone with scalpin' Indians an' no lick to suit his personality. That 'White Mule' brand of Nin's sure would suit his 'ighness to a tee."

Cay hung the lantern on a nail in the roof rafter.

Sky walked across the creaking floorboards. He lifted one of the iron covers of the stove.

"Damn funny thing!" he ejaculated. "She's warm!" His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Cay thrust his hand into the firebox. He nodded in verification.

"That's right. Someone's been here—and not so long ago," the homesteader asserted quietly. "Do the ranchers ever use the place? Do they ever get their grub here?" he added, seeking a solution.

"Naw! It ain't got the earmarks of bein' on a regular round-up. Only a fit place for rustlers, an' a hell hole for them, I reckon," theorized Sky. "We'll camp here 'till mornin'. Guess we had better round-up some chuck."

Cay picked up a battered pail from the floor. He left the cabin in search for water. Sky followed him through the doorway to gather kindling and dry wood.

There was a strange and uncanny silence in the cabin now. Dummy, his hand in the stovebox feeling the tell-tale warmth, was in deep thought. He

was about to dismiss a weird sense of impending danger, and to clean out the stove in readiness for a new fire, when suddenly there was a shriek; a terrifying cry. Something held him spellbound. He thought he heard the clanking of a steel chain. His senses brought the heavy voice of a stranger. Another shriek told him that someone was being attacked!

The smoking wick of the lantern flickered, leaving the cabin almost in darkness.

Dummy was anxious for the immediate return of Cay and Sky. He hoped that his senses had been the subject of some uncanny trick. Unconsciously, his fists clenched. His body steeled for action. He was about to turn to the door, to rush out to help the man in danger, when a presentiment that the rattling of the chain was coming nearer stopped him. There was no mistaking it now. There was a distinct, metallic clanging as if a leash was first taut, then slackened, and then forcibly taut again.

Now he was conscious of the pitiful whining of a wolf, or a dog. It sounded to his senses like the plaintive cry of a savage animal held in captivity.

Except for the flicker of the dying light that threw out a faint, sickly glow the cabin was in total darkness.

Suddenly, at the window frame there appeared the head and shoulders of a huge wolf-hound, its massive jaws, its long, curved tongue moving in ferocious action against the rows of cruel, pointed fangs, silhouetted against the deepening blue of the sky. An instant later, there appeared the clanking

chain, and then part of the towering form of a man.

The animal and man were now at the open door. Straight as a shot from the mouth of a cannon they flew across the cabin toward Dummy.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### WHEN THE SPIRIT BATTLES

For just a fraction of a second, as man and beast plunged across the cabin toward Dummy, he caught a flashing glimpse of them. In that split second he saw the face of a maniac; bulging eyes that gimletted through and through. He saw the powerful shoulders, the massive form, the uplifted, outspread arms that clawed toward him murderously.

The wolf-hound, long grey haunches, ears sharp-pointed and tense, jaws like steel, a long crooked scar down its neck, was equally as terrifying as the man; a monster that knew—like its master—the physical and mental force or instinct of fearless battle that gave no quarter; in whose creed there was only one aim—to command and to win; even though death be the price demanded.

Dummy at once realized that the man was the one known as Darkness Jim; the most feared miscreant in the country, the felon for whom he had been searching. He was ready for him. He was determined to make him answer for the bodily harm to Valma, as well as for the many other acts of banditry.

Dummy swung quickly to one side. The outlaw missed him, falling headlong across the stove; almost capsizing it. The dog, released from the grip of the chain, suddenly twisted its body in mid-air,

landing full force on Dummy, throwing him against the wall. Reaching out in an effort to save himself he felt the furry sides of the animal as it attempted to leap at his throat; its jaws, opening and closing in frenzied hatred, its cruel fangs threatening death in fiendish attack.

Darkness Jim was on his feet. He paused with dramatic intention, watching with admiration the dog tearing savagely at the man's clothes.

The hound gripped Dummy's shoulder, burying its teeth through his wind-breaker and into his flesh. There was a sharp twist in the vice of iron that made the man wince with pain. He struggled to his feet, throwing the wriggling beast from him. The animal's head struck a corner of the tilted stove. There was a dull crash as it overturned; trapping the creature's leg. There was a pitiful outcry as the wolf-hound was hurt; a call to its master to help it in its predicament. Darkness Jim heard. He understood. He rushed to free it. The next second the man leaped upon Dummy as he was about to rush through the open door.

Cassius stood still for a second, holding up a painful, broken paw.

As Dummy almost reached the doorway, both men fell with a dull, sickening thud. The whole shack seemed to vibrate with the force of the blow. As the outlaw fell he struck one of the poplar up-rights that supported the main beam of the cabin. The lantern swayed perilously on its nail. The next second it crashed to the floor, scattering broken glass and oil over the litter of newspapers and magazines.

Except for an occasional flicker from the smouldering wick the cabin was in darkness.

Despite its wounded paw, Cassius went at once to the help of its master, now beneath Dummy. Men and dog fought furiously in a tangled mass on the rough, uneven boards. They struggled and fell from the doorway, first to one wall, smashing the broken chair. Their bodies rocked and swayed in a desperate grip, while the dog leaped and snarled, to the opposite side of the cabin, knocking down shelving, on which were books, utensils, and partly-filled cans of food. Together they struck the thin poles that supported the heavy, sod roof.

Striking the window full force, the glass, sash, and the boxwood boarding, nailed outside as a barricade, were shattered. Each man took terrific punishment. The cowboy struck out with all his force, while the outlaw, his huge fists striking like battering rams, pounded back at his adversary. Kicking and throwing his full weight against the man, as both hit the walls again and again, the desperado was more than a match for Dummy. And the wolf-hound, tearing at the puncher's legs and arms, greatly aided the outlaw.

Men and dog fought as beings possessed!

The very air was charged with murder!

With the outlaw it was a fight to the finish—it was victory! There was no such thing as failure! No surrender! For a few seconds, the man heard once again the surging of the rapids in his ears. He heard the booming of the falls as they mockingly sounded their mighty challenge. He saw himself in the turbulent, tempestuous waters, strik-



ing out in his grim battle near the brink of the falls. He knew what it was to fight. To fight to live! It was an old story with him! He was fighting now as never before. This creature of a man! He told himself that his opponent was already beaten; gradually weakening to complete exhaustion.

With Dummy too, there was no surrender! It was also a fight for victory. Here was the felon, the archfiend for whom he had been combing the ranges for months. Here was the outlaw to whom many of the tragedies in Touchwood Hills could be directly attributed. It was his lawful duty to conquer this man—even if his own life be in dire peril—but before the privilege of making the sacrifice of his life, to assure victory of the conflict.

With Cassius it was the drama of the forest; the aeon-old battle for the survival of the fittest. The law of the Universe. The *esprit de corps* of the pack. As the creature fought now, heredity and tradition and fighting blood of hundreds of years of the greatest victors in all the country urged it on to fly and leap at the enemy; to fight on and on—to bring its enemy down!

As the beast snarled and bit and savagely flung itself at Dummy it struggled to get at his throat. Once when it had struck him its tongue touched blood. The taste further infuriated it; sensing the glorious victory of battle, realizing that the fight was now almost won, that the warm, rich, flowing stream was the first spoils of the chase. It charged and charged; snapping and ripping at the twisting, wriggling, fighting form it knew to be the foe. The

enemy that must be torn to pieces before the glory of conquest.

Dummy was weakening!

He felt, however, that he could beat this massive brute. Summoning super-human strength—so it seemed—he was confident that the victory would soon be his. But every time this thought flashed through his mind, giving renewed courage and energy, the ominous, vicious form of the wolf-hound would immediately dispel it with another terrifying, ferocious leap. Time and time again the huge muzzle of the beast was within two or three inches of his head; lips back from the long, white teeth, the jaws wide and rigid, he could feel the creature's hot, panting-breath upon his cheeks. Almost any second, the crazed animal might reach his scratched and cut face; his bruised and painful eyes, his throbbing, bleeding neck, to tear with its fangs the last fighting strength from his body. Dummy realized it would be the end.

Once, when Darkness Jim had tightened in a grip of steel his hard and long fingers round the cowboy's throat, objects in the room commenced to whirl, the cabin spun round and round, and there was a comparative calm in his mind. For the second he lost sense of his actions. But instantly, he recovered himself; struggling with mighty energy, tearing the man's hands from his neck and tripping him to the floor.

Dummy was fighting for time now. Fighting for the return of Sky or Cay. Perhaps they had been attacked, such as he was being attacked now. Perhaps they were beyond helping him in the uneven

battle. But hopefully the cowboy trusted and fought on with every bit of energy he could command.

Now the outlaw's hands were again at his throat. Would he never be able to break this grip that was gradually shutting out his life? He felt weaker—ready to faint. He could not fight much longer. Where was Sky or Cay? Now the furry beast was at his shoulder again, the heavy chain swinging and striking him a terrific blow. Never had its snarling and snapping seemed as ferocious and as murderous. The animal's teeth caught his face. In jerking away, the lobe of his ear was cut. He was dimly conscious of another warm trickle streaming down his neck. Now the creature's rough-coated tongue was lapping at the wound. The dog was lapping *his* blood. Darkness Jim was now sitting astride him, gripping his throat tighter and tighter; his head was now thumping until it seemed it would burst. There were whirling figures before his eyes and then—perfect calm.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE SECOND DAY OF GRACE

As Dummy lapsed into unconsciousness, Sky, having first rushed to where Cay was seriously injured from a murderous attack, appeared at the doorway. The demolished lantern had set fire to the oil-drenched books and papers scattered about the floor.

Sky forced the door open wider. In the middle of the cabin he saw the outlaw sitting astride Dummy, gripping fiercely at the man's throat; while the wolf-hound was tearing at the puncher's clothes in an attempt to get closer to the wounded shoulder. The flames were now creeping up the main supports of the roof and reaching out dangerously nearer to the fighters. Suddenly, the victor toppled forward, rolling off his opponent. Cassius, observing its master collapse, pranced about excitedly; licking the man's face and whimpering encouragingly at his side.

Sky dragged Dummy outside the cabin. He then carried him to a sheltered place on the prairie several yards away. Returning to the cabin, one corner of the interior now an inferno, he was about to assist the outlaw when the man staggered to his feet. Through swollen, blurred eyes he appraised the cowboy. The next instant, he crouched back and once again became the fighting archfiend that

knew no fear and no surrender. His body tensed with action, his fists clenched again, his great head on the powerful shoulders dropped and turned to one side in readiness for a murderous leap.

Cassius, seeing its master on his feet, immediately turned its attention to the new enemy. Backing swiftly to the wall it bared its bloody teeth, gnarled in savage hatred, then leaped the intervening space like a flash; the links of the chain striking Sky across his head.

Sky was ready! He steeled himself against the framework of the doorway. With a mighty, forceful thrust he threw the dog back toward the flames. It fell on its side heavily. There was a hissing, a nauseating, sickening odour of singeing hair and burning flesh. The beast let out a cry of agony that made him sick at heart. The creature sprung to its feet. Leaping past the cowboy it shot out into the night.

Darkness Jim saw the wolf-hound dart from the cabin. For an instant it commanded his whole attention. He was awe-struck. Courage, bravado, and temerity were instantaneously turned to dread, horripilation, and panic. In a twinkling, bold assurance was swept away to cringing abhorrence. His broken, bleeding lips framed the dog's name; appealing to its fidelity of guardianship, praying for its help in this second of greatest need.

Sky, observing the outlaw cringe with fear, knew that the man was practically beaten. Physically he was broken. The cowboy reached out and grasped the man's shoulder, intending to bind him in captivity. With a violent twist Darkness Jim wrenched

himself free. He prepared to leap upon the cowboy.

With one blow, his whole weight and power behind the drive, Sky knocked the man to the floor. The outlaw made an effort to stand, but fell forward unconscious.

The flames shot higher. They grew stronger. They crept along and up the chinked and mud-plastered walls; the spurting, fiery tongues licking into the nooks and corners, the curliques hugging the pole supports, the runners zigzagging across the boxwood flooring to delve to the prairie beneath, until the whole cabin was a roaring vortex.

Reaching out toward Sky, they scorched and singed him. They raced along the floor to where Darkness Jim was lying, setting alight his ripped, blood-stained garments.

The cowboy quickly smothered the flames on the outlaw's clothes. Getting a grip of the man he dragged him through the doorway to a place of comparative safety a short distance from the still form of Dummy.

Suddenly, the heavy, sod roof of the cabin collapsed, carrying parts of the walls with it; sending up showers of flying sparks, followed with alarming columns of engulfing danger; lighting up the skies with the menacing glory of a mighty master.

A new terror faced Sky! With the flames leaping about the *débris* of the shack, the blaze rapidly stretching out in every direction, there was danger that the conflagration would reach the dried grass and deadwood of the nearby bluffs, starting a forest fire that might, with the wind from the northwest,

wipe out the ranges of Touchwood Hills; sending to death and destruction, new settlers, their homes, all they owned and possessed in the world, as well as the homes of the ranchers, and burning or suffocating to death entire herds of magnificent cattle.

Sky was greatly alarmed! He hardly knew what to do. Cay was lying helpless and in agony at the back of the shack. He was in dire need of immediate medical attention. Dummy had been knocked and choked into unconsciousness and should be cared for at once. And there were the flames already tearing across the gap of dried grass toward the bluffs. There was also the risk that the fire would burn back toward the rapids endangering the prostrate forms of the men. They would be trapped between the flames and the racing stream. It would be certain death for them all.

He could hear the booming of the falls and the seething and churning of the rapids a short distance away. It was, indeed, a strange irony of fate. On the one hand a wide river with its mighty power to quench a multitude of death-dealing fires, on the other hand the inferno that was fast escaping beyond control, to send to death brave men who slept peacefully; whose mightiest efforts would be puny in salvation.

The man looked in the direction of the waters. He saw the reflection of the flames on the surface. The sight held his gaze. It was a river of burning gold. The whitecaps, dancing in the firelight, radiating red-golden hues of every shade, while the placid whirlpools sent back a burnish of magic russet and rose.

His clothes, still smoking from the fire, his arms singed and blistering painfully from the intense heat, Sky was prompted for the instant to dive into the cool, inviting waters for relief.

A movement from Dummy called him from the thought.

With a little help the puncher recovered sufficiently to stagger to his feet. Realizing the impending danger, he motioned, asking for Cay. Sky pointed. Dummy made his way to the homesteader's side. He hastily examined the man's injuries. There was a wound on the neck and shoulder from which blood was flowing, and an ugly cut on the back of the head, as if the settler had been hit with a heavy blunt weapon. It appeared evident that the wolf-hound had attacked from the front, while a man had struck from the rear.

Sky joined Dummy. They tried to help the sufferer.

Observing the homesteader's right hand tightly closed, Sky gently pryed it open. In the palm he found a ragged piece of a green and black checkered windbreaker on which was a green button. He placed the piece of cloth in his pocket.

Cay was dying.

The men realized that the end was near. It was a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds. They attempted to revive him, to get him to speak. Sky asked how they could help. What could they do for him? There was no answer. The face grew paler. It appeared lifeless. In a moment the aged settler breathed his last.

They stood motionless for a few seconds, gazing



reverently at the still, frail form. Picking him up tenderly they carried him to a willow thicket at the edge of the river.

Hurrying to the shelter where their saddle-beasts were secured, they unfastened the excited, prancing creatures, leading them to a small grove near the rapids. Patting them comfortingly they returned to the blazing wreck of the cabin.

Darkness Jim was recovering. Staggering to his feet he made a clumsy lurch at Sky. At the outlaw's feet was a motionless, shapeless mass of singed hair and flesh. As the man moved, the heap stirred slightly; crawling on its belly to be as near as possible to the feet of its saviour and master.

"Man!—if you are a man! Fight that fire!" shouted Sky as he cautiously dodged the outlaw. "The whole country will soon be afire! Fight, damn you! Fight with ev'y bit of strength you have! Fight, damn you, or else I'll choke ev'y wisp of breath out of your worthless hide!"

A new light suddenly came to the eyes of Darkness Jim as he realized the import of the words; a challenge to battle, a struggle against the elements for survival.

"*Fight!*" The word, the command, held magic, life, salvation, victory!

"*Fight?* Yes, I'll fight—and I'll win!" Tearing off his singed, blood-smearred windbreaker he rushed to the edge of the creeping flames and immediately started beating them out with a force and fury of a madman; an energy super-human, unbelievable, ungovernable.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE TURN IN THE LANE

Dummy and Sky, wearied and fatigued, followed with comparative feeble effort the gallant lead of the outlaw. With only a few yards separating the men the trio fought the encroaching line of fire. The smouldering, towering monsters of pine, spruce and fir readily catching the flaming torch; falling easy prey to the engulfing torrents of destruction.

Together the men, although always with a curtain of smoke between them, slashed and pounded at the fiery fingers that seemed to mock their punitive efforts to stem the fire that roared defiance.

Suddenly, Dummy staggered from exhaustion, the next second falling near to the blazing underbrush. Darkness Jim realized the cowboy's predicament. Rushing to his side he half carried and half dragged him several yards from the raging inferno.

Rushing back, the outlaw struck left and right at the base of the flames as they caught this trunk and that dried-out scrub-patch. He laughingly acclaimed each new challenge; welcoming in a spirit of bravado each added flaming assault that darted up before him.

The conflagration roared on unabated. Fanned by a gradually increasing northwest wind it raced on; jumping from tree to tree, recovering in sheer

delight from a fallen monster of the forest to acclaim the new victims of its gripping, ensnarling clutch that, as a combatant like the hardy, desperado, knew no surrender.

The men's hands were scorched and blistered. Their eyes swollen almost to blindness, their arms and legs singed and seared by the hellish flames, they fought on. Time and time again, Sky was prompted to give up; to accept that comforting relief in the cool waters that surged and seethed invitingly.

What was death now? A compassionate end in the soothing whirlpools would be a happy release. A quiet, peaceful sleep in the understanding, gentle arms that reached from the river of flowing gold would be merciful compared with such torture of heat, burn and mockery.

But throughout all, Darkness Jim fought on as if there were no end to his strength of power, endurance, and dynamic energy. He continued to blacken a long stretch of the red border of burning prairie and flame-lit trees. He appeared inspired to even bolder courage and super-human attempt as a blaze, here and there, shot out and understruck his victory crowned a few minutes previously.

A change of wind suddenly fanned the fire to the nearby bluffs that afforded a protection to the fighters and the inert form of the wolf-hound from being forced to seek refuge in the rapids. The blazing, falling trunks were closing in on all sides, leaving the river as the only avenue of escape.

The men were struck back as if a giant hand of a crisis, ironically amused at their puny efforts, was

now determined to quash them in a single master stroke. As the oppressive, suffocating smoke, the scalding, leaping flames and clouds of red-hot fire-brands crowded upon them, Sky swayed to the edge of the waters; the invigorating spray, and the cool, moist-laden air coming as a godsend to his parched and burning throat.

Taking off his windbreaker and drenching it in the river he returned to Dummy's side. He was about to bathe the man's face and neck and shoulders, when Dummy recovered. He tried to stand up. Sky helped him. They started to walk to the water's edge.

Dummy acted as if he had lost his sight. With arms outstretched he groped like a blind man. Sky looked at his companion's eyes. They were closed and swollen. The skin around the sockets was discolored and scorched, the eyebrows were singed. Apparently, the eyes were suffering from the flames and dense smoke as well as from the blows received in the fight. Every few seconds Dummy would open his eyes and stare vacantly ahead, then, closing them to seek relief from the pain, he would stagger a few yards. It was evident that he could see only a few feet, and even then not clearly. Sky was sick at heart. He took a gentle grip of the man's arm, leading him to the river.

Reaching down to the rapids they drenched their scorching clothes. They splashed the cool waters over their heads. Dummy bathed his eyes in an effort to relieve the pain and to regain his normal sight. Sky tied a saturated handkerchief across his face, leaving only his eyes exposed, so as to be able

to breathe through the stifling atmosphere. He told Dummy to do likewise.

The outlaw fought on, but was losing ground. More than once he was almost surrounded by the flames; it seemed that in the next second the conflagration would engulf him. Still he struck about and around as if his life, and every other life in the Universe depended upon the immediate extinction of the grim, fire-fiend.

Suddenly the man fell. In an instant he was on his feet. His clothes were ablaze.

Sky saw him stagger again and then collapse in the middle of a freshly ignited thicket. He ran to help him.

Dummy, through smarting, injured eyes and the dense screen of smoke, saw somebody fall and someone rush to help. He could not distinguish whether the hazy figure that fell was the cowboy or the outlaw; the ghost-like smudges darting before his eyes and fatigued mind taxing his power of sight almost to blindness.

Now one of the men was pulling the other from the fire. Dummy found himself smothering the blaze from the clothes of the man on the ground.

Clutching the smoking form of Darkness Jim about the shoulders, Sky dragged him toward the river.

Dummy grasped what remained of a green and black checkered windbreaker from the hand of the stricken man. Groping his way to the ledge, to the actual spot where the outlaw and the wolf-hound had previously plunged into the raging torrents, he lay full length, reaching low so that the garment

could catch some of the cool waters. He was about to pull the jacket up when it caught on a rugged craig. In trying to release it the gripping fingers of the rapids snatched it from his tired and numbed hands.

Darkness Jim recovered. Standing up he glanced around seeking Cassius. Observing its still form he went to its side. He stooped and caressed the creature affectionately. The animal looked up. One of its eyes was gorged and burnt, its once gorgeous fur was singed to an unsightly appearance; its former grandeur was now a skeleton of agony. The creature received the caress as a glowing tribute for its devotion; a just reward that somewhat alleviated its injuries and suffering.

Darkness Jim stood up. He appeared as a beaten man; a warrior whose sword has broken as the triumphant enemy advances.

He glanced for a second at the men now seated on the ground; recovering from their strenuous exertion. Looking again to the oncoming battalion of flames the outlaw realized that they were gradually being surrounded and swept back to the rapids. It was only a matter of moments now before all would be faced with the alternative of escaping into the stream, to battle the swift current and to reach the opposite shore before being swept over the falls, or of charging through the wall of fire and smoke in the hope that an avenue of escape awaited beyond.

"Cassius!" pleaded the outlaw, caressing the wolf-hound again. "There is only one way, now!" He looked at the animal, realizing its helpless,

crippled condition. "It is still a fight, Cassius. There is only one way. Come!" He took a step toward the flames in readiness to dash through the barricade of fire. He hesitated to glance back at the creature.

The wolf-hound heard him. It tried to stand up. Holding up its broken paw it took a feeble step forward, but when it saw and felt the blaze it quivered back and turned toward the rapids.

Darkness Jim stood still. He hardly knew what to do.

"No, Cassius. You could not survive. There is only *one* way. Follow me, Cassius."

He waited a few seconds for the animal to comprehend, to stand up, to crouch in readiness to jump, following his lead, but it slumped back in agony.

The next second the outlaw decided. Picking up the shaggy, burned mass of fur and bending low so as to shield the animal he staggered toward the curtain of flames and heavy, suffocating smoke to seek the safety of the open prairie beyond.

Watching the outlaw, Sky regained his feet. He intended to prevent Darkness Jim from carrying out his plan, but in an instant man and dog were gone; swallowed up in the choking air and blaze of the inferno.

Almost immediately the wind changed again, sweeping the flames from the small clearing to renew their fighting rampage down the wooded hills and fertile valleys of the ranges of Touchwood Hills.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### WHEN MANKIND FAILS

It was hours later, shortly after dawn, when the men recovered sufficiently to help themselves. Dummy was the first to stagger to his feet. Making sure that Sky was not seriously hurt, satisfying himself that his companion was resting as comfortably as possible, he did not disturb him. Making his way to where the saddle beasts had been secured, he fed and watered them. It was apparent they had spent a restless, nerve-racking night, but appeared unharmed by the fire, which fortunately had kept a safe distance from the shelter.

Dummy returned to the edge of the rapids.

After the escape of the outlaw, Sky, utterly fatigued, had dropped to the prairie. The next thing he remembered he thought he heard a shout. He sat up, listening intently.

Above the rumbling and seething and occasional crash of falling timber, now gradually growing more indistinct as the flames sped from the clearing, he heard someone call. Were his ears playing him a prank? He looked to where Dummy was on the ledge drenching a garment in the waters below. Apparently, his companion was not aware of the hail.

Sky sat still, straining his ears for a repetition of



the shout. His mind went back to the tragedy of the night. The outlaw had escaped. Who was he? He felt sure that he had seen the man before. Was it out West, where he and Ninga had ridden the ranges? Perhaps it was in that small cow town while loading steers for that last Chicago trip. He was never any good at remembering faces, anyhow. Names and cattle brands he could always recall, but faces never! It had been the subject of one of Ninga's pet jibes; that if Sky did not see himself in a mirror for three whole days, and then glanced at himself he would immediately want to become acquainted with the new partner.

He could not even recall what the outlaw looked like now. The smoke and fire on his eyes were to blame, he told himself. It was passing consolation. Dummy was almost blind. *He* was a smart man, and much younger—and, no doubt, Dummy could not recall what the outlaw looked like. And the fact that Sky had hardly taken a real good look at the man consoled him further. It had been a dark night and the smoke and flames had made his eyes smart and water. No, he could not remember where he had seen the outlaw before. Perhaps the idea that he had seen him sometime in the past was just a fanatical trick of his confused mind. He doubted whether he would be able to recognize the wanted man if he saw him again.

For several moments Sky sat in pensive mood. Every muscle in his body ached; every slight movement bringing a sharp protest. He was beyond further fire-fighting for the day. It seemed that

he would not be himself for weeks. He gazed at the distant fringe of fire with its curtain of deep blue smoke. It fascinated him. It held his meditative attention.

He thought he saw the figure of a man walking along the edge of the fire-line. A tall, slightly bent smudge that moved like a phantom in the dancing heat waves. His eyes narrowed as he tried to make the object clearer. He blinked his swollen and painful eyes to assure himself that he was not the victim of a hallucination. Now the man was headed in his direction. The figure grew larger and more distinct. It looked like . . . Yes, he was sure he had seen this man before. It was the rancher who had helped them at Cay's homestead at the time of the stampede. He remembered his name. It was . . . Killdare. That was it . . . Jawl Killdare. The man who had done so much to help all the sufferers. The greatest benefactor in the ranges. The man who was constantly fighting to help the settlers, to stamp out the many tragic incidents that were resulting in so much widespread suffering to homesteaders and damage to their homes and crops.

The rancher was near to him now. But it was a different Jawl. His clothes were almost ripped from his body, his hands and arms were blistered and burned, his face cut and scratched, his hair singed and matted with blood.

"Quick fellers," panted the rancher, in a weak but commanding tone. "There's not a moment to lose!" His voice was shaky and unnerved. "The devil's loose. It's the end of Touchwood! The boys are with me, fightin' for their lives!"

Jawl hesitated as he realized the pitiful condition of the cowboy. He saw Dummy in the distance. He turned and retraced his steps across the burnt and smouldering prairie. A few moments later he returned with a mounted policeman. His tunic was off. He was carrying a first aid medical kit. Jawl gave orders to attend to Sky and Dummy and to take them with all possible haste to a place of safety and rest.

For three days the forest fire raged. It swept across large areas, its roar audible for a mile; driving out deer, bears, wolves, and other denizens of the woodlands, frightened, trembling and panic-stricken, seeking in the supreme law the compassionate salvation of mankind. During the night the red glow lit up the skies as bright as noon, while during the day the heavy clouds of smoke and flying embers turned the daylight into twilight. Never had such a conflagration been known. The stacked crops of settlers in the pathway of destruction were completely wiped out; leaving the homesteaders homeless and desperately in want. Years of strenuous toil and hopeful dreams of success and happiness were slashed away in the twinkling of an eye. Herds of fat, sleek cattle were stampeded, scores maddened to a pitiful end.

For three days and three nights an army of noble men, and a woman and a girl fought and battled the blazing prairie and the defiant, flaming giants. It was a struggle of the ages! A veritable fight for existence! A conflict gigantic!

On the fourth day storm clouds gathered in the

northwest. During the late morning they charged down like battalions of the sky to reinforce the depleted and defeated legions of the earth.

The Heavens opened and the rains fell.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE SHADOW OF THE LAW

It was a full two weeks before Dummy and Sky returned to Touchwood Hills. After first aid was rendered at the side of the rapids, they had been taken to the small settlement of Copeland, several miles to the southwest, where their painful injuries were dressed and nursed to recovery.

Upon his return, Dummy, in company with a mounted policeman, was much occupied for several days seeking and obtaining facts and clues on the latest calamity to strike the country. The disaster had been tremendous. Ten homesteaders had been seriously burned and had been taken to the settlement, and practically all of the settlers within a radius of twenty miles had lost everything; their homes, crops, stock, implements, and personal effects swept away, leaving them with only the scorched and torn clothing in which they had escaped.

Several cowboys had also been seriously burned, three ranchers had lost heavily in herds of cattle which had been stampeded with alarming loss, and many ranch cabins and stacks of food and produce had been totally destroyed.

The heaviest loser in Touchwood Hills was Jawl Killdare, although his ranch buildings had been spared. The sympathy of the entire country was extended to him. But despite his great loss and

sorrow he had been the one to rise up stronger than ever in the generous outpouring of necessities and help. He and the men he commanded did everything humanely possible to alleviate the sufferings and to replace the losses of the homesteaders. For ten days following the fire, Pine Needle resembled a field hospital more than a ranch; the many settlers being cared for and nursed to convalescence, while the cowboys hauled logs and other building material, as well as provisions, for the erection and stocking of new homes among the charred *débris* of the former sod, tar-papered shacks.

The name of Jawl Kildare, as the greatest friend and benefactor in the whole country, was once again heard and hailed on every side.

Bidding the mounted policeman farewell at the Pryor clearing, Dummy returned to Pine Needle.

Two days later, after the evening meal, Dummy started to leave the cabin. He motioned to Jawl to follow. For an instant, the rancher was puzzled, but on second thoughts considered it was some trivial matter that called for attention that night.

At the corral gate two saddle beasts were ready for the trail.

Jawl looked questioningly at Dummy. He gazed at the eager, prancing creatures, and then back at the man for an explanation.

They stood facing each other for a few seconds. Dummy leaned against his horse for support. There were tears in his eyes. Twice his lips moved as if he was about to speak, but each time he turned away; unable to express the words that were on the tip of his tongue.

Jawl realized that something was wrong. He had never known Dummy to act this way before. He had a presentiment of some danger, something tragic. He placed a hand on the man's shoulder in a friendly caress, seeking his full confidence. He motioned, asking what was the trouble. How he could help?

Dummy straightened. His lips were set in determination. He looked square into the rancher's eyes.

"Jawl Killdare," he spoke in a nervous, broken tone. "Jawl—you must come with me to—"

"Dummy!—You're speaking! How—I—I don't understand!" He was astounded. He could not voice his surprise, his happiness at hearing him talk. Clutching the man's windbreaker in his enthusiasm, he shook him. "Tell me, Dummy—how—"

Dummy turned away. He was quiet for a few seconds.

"Jawl, I have a—terrible—a *nasty* job to do," he whispered nervously. "I'm sure there *must* be a mistake. Everything will turn out all right, but—you must come with me—to headquarters."

"Headquarters? Come with you? Dummy, I don't understand! An' you're speaking? What—" Jawl was nonplussed. He hardly knew which of the problems to solve first.

"Jawl—listen to me. I cannot speak the way I should. It hurts me—very much, but you are—under—" He turned away, gazing into the distance.

Jawl stepped back to look into Dummy's eyes, endeavouring to read the man's thoughts, seeking an explanation of the unspoken words.

"I love Valma, we all do," continued Dummy, quietly. "We always will. And—if there is such a thing as love between men—then there is between us. I want to save Valma from any suffering or sorrow. I want Eric, and all the boys to still remember you as the greatest friend and the squarest man they ever met. They are not going to know about this. God, I hope it *is* all a mistake. Perhaps it is—God, I hope so!" Dummy stepped to the head of his horse. He prepared to unfasten the beasts from the rail of the corral.

The rancher stood as a man petrified. In a split second his attitude had miraculously changed from that of a sympathetic and surprised friend to that of a hunted and trapped fugitive; his eyes glaring terror, alarm, and pitiful tragedy.

Dummy saw the change in the man. Unconsciously he felt himself steel for immediate action. But in an instant he recovered, regaining complete control of his feelings.

"Come on, Jawl," he advised comfortingly. "Let us go back to the cabin, I want—"

"No, no—a moment! Let me think, let me—let me alone—for just a moment. I'll be all right!" Jawl was gasping, endeavouring to reconstruct his puzzled, confused thoughts. He covered his eyes. Once again he saw himself on the high vantage point, gazing out to the distant ranges in the early morning, seeing once again that sea of cattle, that stream of flowing gold. Suddenly, it changed to a tidal wave, threatening to engulf him in its mountainous sweep; crushing him to destruction. He tried to throw off the spectre, recalling the sacred



memory of—her, Valma's mother. The girl must never know. Now his head was whirling. He was going mad. He felt his whole body weaken. He was falling; being swept to oblivion by that evil spirit, that devil's strip that gripped and throttled him in a vise of steel.

"Come, come, Jawl, old friend," consoled Dummy, placing an arm about the man's shoulders, helping him to straighten up. "Everything will turn out all right. It's just a horrible mistake. I'm with you. I'll be with you to the last. Come, cheer up—be a brave man."

Together, in silence, they walked to within several yards of the house, Dummy leading the saddle beasts. He placed his arm over the rancher's shoulder.

Jawl stopped. He was going to collapse.

"Come, come, Jawl—everything will be all right soon," repeated Dummy. "Better give some order to the boys, telling them that we are going away, and that we might be gone for—a long time," he whispered. "I don't want them to know."

The rancher reeled. He leaned against the horse for support.

The next second Dummy assisted him to the saddle.

Moving silently from the ranch buildings, two riders rode slowly along the trail in the direction of the district headquarters of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at Punnichy.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE LAW OF THE RANGES

Jawl Killdare was on trial for his life!

The room of the new log schoolhouse at Progress had been hushed as a court-room for two days. The cattle king, seated in the prisoner's dock, had listened with heavy heart to the testimony of the prosecution. The country demanded the life of this man for the murder of Cay Pryor. Jawl had also listened to the testimony of the defense, although with a gradually fading hope.

With the pupils' low desks stacked in one corner, three rows of seats had been arranged and roped off for the men of the jury. On either side of the judge's dias a seat had been reserved. On the one sat the witnesses giving evidence, on the other, in deep and puzzled thought, sat the accused rancher. Several chairs at the opposite side and at the back of the hall were occupied by spectators.

On the first day there had been an uncanny silence as the cowpunchers from Pine Needle, and other ranches, and homesteaders had arrived for the opening of the court. Placing their firearms at the horse shelter, in accordance with a court order, they greeted one another in awed whispers, their expressions being those of worried and perplexed men; yet all displayed a hope that the arrest of Jawl, their greatest friend, was a grave mistake; a mis-

understanding that would right itself within the first hour of the hearing.

Jawl Killdare being tried for *murder*?

It was inconceivable!

Jawl Killdare a *murderer*? Their best friend who had contributed so liberally to every new settler. A man who had fought shoulder to shoulder with them to save their crops, their cattle and their homes; placing everything at his disposal at their ready command, without a mention or thought of the slightest mercenary reward.

The thought of the man being anything but a generous-true-hearted benefactor with beyond belief. The terrible accusation was, indeed, a gross mistake that would soon be fully rectified. Jawl would be honorably acquitted; hailed as a leader wronged.

Promptly at ten o'clock on the first day a democrat, carrying the Judge and two lawyers, had arrived from the shack of a nearby settler. The home had been established as the headquarters of the trio.

Another building in the vicinity had been commandeered for the twelve men of the jury, while a third had been converted into a temporary barracks where the accused rancher was held in custody.

A few seconds after the arrival of the democrat, two mounted policemen, escorting Jawl on his own horse, reached the doorway of the school.

There had been a flutter of excitement as the punchers and the homesteaders saw the rancher. A few took a step forward as he dismounted; hoping to grip his hand in heartfelt sympathy, to whisper a word of cheer, to inspire a spirit of hope

and encouragement, but one of the constables barred their way, ordering them courteously to keep back.

That first day Jawl had been neatly dressed and his face freshly shaven, but he was plainly showing the strain of a great mental battle; the multitude of worries and fears that haunted him.

In the anteroom the Judge and lawyers had donned their gowns. The clerk took his place near the judge's chair. Opening a notebook, he carefully examined the finely sharpened points of several pencils in readiness for the verbatim report.

The Judge, a dignified, elderly man, had addressed the jury forcefully and eloquently in an introductory plea:

"Gentlemen of the jury: You have been called together to carry out your duty. A duty to your country, a duty in the cause of justice, a duty in the rightful cause of humanity, and—a duty to your God. You have been called here today, and sworn, to decide whether a man is *guilty* or *not-guilty* of a crime of which he is accused. Upon your hearing of the testimony, upon your deliberations, upon your most careful analysis of the facts, and—upon your verdict rests the life of a man. It is indeed a serious duty for each of you. And each of you in your own heart must thoroughly give the most solemn thought before arriving at the verdict.

"You will hear the testimony of the witnesses. You will hear the cross-examinations of the learned counsel. You will hear the summing-up of the evidence. If any one of you is not thoroughly sure of any point in the facts, it is your solemn duty to

demand further information and complete enlightenment. Remember, the life of a man—one of our brotherhood—hands in the balance.

"You must not let your feelings sway you. If it is shown that the accused is an upright man, one who has accomplished considerable good in his community, but yet it is proved by sworn testimony that in a moment of thoughtlessness, in a moment of insane rage, it was his hand that committed the ghastly deed that sent a brother to his death, then you have no alternative but to bring in a verdict of guilty. If, on the other hand, your most thorough deliberations and findings lead you to the decision, each in his own heart, that it was *not* the hand of the accused that committed the crime, then your verdict must be *not-guilty*. If this is the verdict, the prisoner will be freed and honorably acquitted."

The Judge paused. He leaned forward.

"Gentlemen, there is one point that I cannot impress too strongly upon each of you." The words were deep, commanding, impressive. "If there is a doubt, the slightest shadow of a doubt in your minds, then the prisoner must be given *the benefit of that doubt!* And in conclusion, I cannot impress too strongly upon each of you that despite the goodness of the accused on the one hand, and the evil—if there is such evil proved—on the other hand, then that evil as it pertains to this case must be fully weighed. *'Thou shalt not kill. For no man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and*

*mammon.*' Gentlemen, do your duty to God. See that this man, the accused, has justice."

The lawyer for the prosecution, tall, striking, relentless, stood before the jury.

Sky was the first witness called. He took his place on the stand. He was sworn. He was face to face with the Crown Attorney.

"Mr. Columbus Shipman," started the lawyer, "you know the prisoner?"

"Yes, sir!—I've known Jawl since—"

"Just answer 'yes' or 'no,'" interrupted the attorney, firmly. "No added statements required. You say you *know* the prisoner? Very well. You also knew Cay Pryor, the man who was murdered?"

"Yes, sir! An'—yes!" Sky was a little perturbed.

"Were you with Cay Pryor on the night of the twenty-first of September—the night Cay Pryor was killed?" The lawyer paced across the room.

"Yes, sir!"

"Mr. Columbus Shipman, tell the gentlemen of the jury just what happened that night. The night that an aged homesteader, a peaceful law-abiding settler, was foully murdered." The words left a tragic sting.

The cowboy was embarrassed. He moved in his chair uneasily. His lips moved to speak, but were quiet.

"Come now!" urged the attorney sharply. "Tell us how you came to be with Cay Pryor that night. Tell us where you went. Tell us what happened."

Starting off hesitatingly, Sky related the incidents of the ride to assist some homesteaders reported in

trouble. He dwelt on the finding of the deserted cabin . . . the outcry from Cay. That was all he knew. He had hastened to help the man, but was too late. The blow had been struck. He heard fighting in the cabin and hurried back to investigate.

"Thank you, Mr. Shipman," commented the lawyer. "But what about a green button that you found? You remember! It was found tightly clasped in the hand of the murdered man? Come now, you found it yourself!" The lawyer snapped. "Tell us all about that green button!"

## CHAPTER XXXV

### DUMMY GIVES HIS EVIDENCE

Sky pondered.

The attorney was agitated. He grew impatient.

"Now, come, remember, Mr. Shipman. You found a piece of a windbreaker with a button attached? It was a green button? It was clasped tightly in the hand of the murdered man?"

"Yes." Sky remembered.

"Did you give that button to Police Constable Steele?"

"To whom?"

"To Police Constable Steele. The man who was with you at the time! You gave it to him?"

Sky was puzzled. He could not recall a *police-man* being present that night.

"The policeman didn't come 'till the next mornin', then he took me and Dummy to Raymore, no—it was to Copeland that he took us."

The attorney paused. He paced the floor again.

"Well, did you give the button to—this man—you call Dummy?"

"No—I don't believe I did. It must have been lost on the prairie."

Reaching on the table beside his brief case, the attorney unwrapped a package. A torn and burnt windbreaker fell out. Picking it up the lawyer thrust it in front of Sky:



"Ever see this before?"

The cowboy looked at the coat. The odor of the garment brought back many memories of the thrilling night of the prairie fire. He fingered the windbreaker curiously.

"Yes—I think I've seen that before."

"Whose coat is it?"

"I believe I saw Dummy with it. Yes, he was fightin' the fire with it. I remember now!"

"That's enough." The attorney paced to the window.

The lawyer for the defense, red-haired, bristling, a terrier of a man, stood before the cowboy.

"Mr. Shipman, you swear that you know the prisoner? You've known him a long time? And you know him to be the greatest benefactor in the whole country? A man who has helped scores, hundreds of settlers? A man who has brought untold blessings to many poverty-stricken homesteaders? You know him to be a law-abiding, good, honest, and upright man?"

"Yes, sir!" drawled Sky in proudful boast.

"Did you see *this* man, *this* man before you, on the night of the twenty-first of September—the night Cay Pryor was murdered?"

"No—that is, not until early the next mornin', when he came to help Dummy an' me."

"Then, as far as you can swear, and you are under oath, you did not see him *that* night? You did not see him until the following morning? That would be many hours after the man was murdered?"

"Yes, sir!" answered Sky to the trio of questions.

"This sweater coat," the lawyer for the defense picked up the garment, "whose coat is it?"

"I don't know."

"That's all."

"Just a moment, Mr. Shipman," interrupted the prosecuting attorney, as Sky was about to step from the stand.

"You said that you did not see *this* man on the night of the twenty-first—the night of the crime? Take another look at him! Did you not swear that you saw a man known as Darkness Jim at the cabin? Did you not fight, and beat Darkness Jim after he had fought—this man you call Dummy? Take another look at this man!"

"Yes, sir, I fought a man, but—" Sky was puzzled. He looked at Jawl. He tried to picture the cruel, murderous features of the tyrant he had battled against those of the rancher, now palid, kind, generous. The cowboy shook his head slowly. "No, sir, I did not see Jawl, this man—until early the next mornin'."

The name of Constable Steele was called as the next witness. A guard opened the door and admitted Dummy, smartly attired in the uniform of a mounted policeman. He walked briskly to the stand; his spurs jingling.

There was a hubbub throughout the room as the cowboys and the homesteaders who had known Dummy as only a deaf and dumb mute recognized him as Constable Steele. They could not believe their eyes. Now Dummy was speaking. The hubbub grew louder. The striking of the Judge's gavel on the desk brought silence.

Throughout the long afternoon of the first day, during the following day, and well into the night, Dummy related the result of his investigation. The Crown Attorney laid particular stress on the details of the stampede at the Pryor clearing.

On three occasions the lawyer for the defense objected to the questioning. He declared that his client was being intimidated. That his client was being tried for the murder of Cay Pryor, and questions and facts regarding stampedes, forest fires, and other misfortunes, were irrelevant.

On two occasions the Judge sustained the objections, on the third, he had cautioned the attorney to confine his examination of the witness to the facts and the night of the murder; unless other facts had a direct and distinct bearing on the crime.

But by subtle prosecution, the Crown Attorney was successful in bringing out evidence that many of the misfortunes could be attributed to the accused. That the prisoner was the instigator of several of the felonious acts that had resulted in widespread suffering, hardship, and countless privations for the new settlers. That the prisoner was *not* the altruistic benefactor, the big brother, the saviour of the ranges, that he had been painted, but that he was an ingrate, an archfiend, a tyrant whose chief aim was to frighten and to plunder the homesteaders, to discourage them, to drive them from the country, to terrorize them away from the ranges that had once been his wealth-producing domain.

It was the old story, the constant battle of the West, the new and the old, but here a master mind was working. On the one hand helping the poverty-

stricken, confiding settlers, a veritable father-confessor, giving them necessities, gifts and his unctuous benediction. This would be the part played for weeks and perhaps months. On the other hand, in a single night, in a single stroke of felony he would take advantage of that great confidence, he would undermine that great faith entrusted to him; destroying the settlers' homes, their crops, their personal effects, in fact, everything they possessed in the world; crippling them financially, physically, and morally.

With head down, Dummy was from time to time reluctant, but the rapid-fire examination by the Crown Attorney built up a barricade of guilt in front of Jawl against which there seemed no salvation.

The Crown Attorney dabbed his handkerchief on his beaded forehead as he concluded his long and searching examination. The statement, establishing the fact that the policeman had actually taken the green and black checkered windbreaker from the hands of the accused man, was a piece of strong evidence for the Crown. He knew that the garment had been lost; swept away in the swift current of the rapids. Perhaps his learned friend would make that a point of doubt, but he was ready. Dummy had picked up the jacket, a few days after the murder, several miles below the falls. A fine, clever piece of work for the prosecution.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE UNSEEN HAND

At the end of the second day Jawl was plainly showing the tremendous strain of his ordeal. On the morning of the first day he had been neatly dressed and there had been an expression of courage and hope in his sleepless eyes, but now he was unshaven, his clothes were dusty and creased. His hair was unkempt, the blue circles beneath his blood-shot, staring eyes stood out prominently against the ashen pallor of his skin. His face was devoid of any expression and his eyes rolled as though they could not focus upon any object. It seemed that he was trying to blot out the picture before them, to convince himself that what perhaps was reality was in truth falsity. Throughout the last hour of this day in court he sat with his head cradled on his arm. Several times he half rose from his chair only to be restrained by the hand of a policeman. It was plain that Jawl was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

When he walked out of the court-house that evening, with the plodding uncertain steps of a somnambulist, it was to lean upon the arm of False. As they made their way to the democrat Jawl mumbled: "I am so tired. Take me away. Take me right away, *now*."

On the morning of the third day the lawyer for the defense battered and rammed the tower of guilt

that had been built up the preceding day. Under oath Dummy admitted reluctantly that he had been commanded to act in the role of a deaf and dumb cowpuncher in order to investigate the many mysterious, harrowing, tragic incidents that were throwing the country into a state of turmoil and chaos. The lawyer jumped and gestured wildly as he forced answers from the policeman. He would not be beaten, he would fight on until the enemy surrendered unconditionally. Bit by bit he weakened the Crown's evidence, piece by piece he swayed the structure that had been erected to crush this human being.

During the late morning the court was interrupted by the arrival of a wagon on which a huge crate was secured. The spectators wondered expectantly, but when they observed that the case was lifted down and placed by the door, they returned their attention to the hearing; dismissing the matter as one in connection with supplies for the new school.

The terrier-like lawyer fought on.

He came to the question of the checkered wind-breaker.

There was a faint smile on the Crown Attorney's face.

"You say you found this coat, this sweater, in the hands of the accused rancher? You swore that it was in the hands of the same man who struck the death blow?" flared the defense. "Did you see that death blow?"

Dummy gazed about nervously.

"Come, now!" shouted the defense. "*Did* you

see that blow struck?"

"No, sir!"

"Then how do you know, how *can* you stand there and swear that this sweater was taken from the hands of the man who killed Cay Pryor? Is all your testimony based on such unfounded, dubious statements? Remember it was a dark night. The first thing you knew of trouble at the deserted cabin was a cry for help. The next instant you were attacked, and in the dark. Remember—it was the next instant! Does it not occur to you that there might have been two men, or perhaps three, at the cabin that night? Does it not occur to you that the man striking the blow might have escaped unseen through the bush?"

"I did not look at it that way," proffered Dummy.

"No, of course you didn't!"

The lawyer for the defense picked up the torn windbreaker.

"You say that you took *this* coat from the hands of the accused? Tell me, was this sweater in your care from the time you took it from the man to the time you turned it over to your inspector?"

"No, it was lost in the river just after I took it from the man. I found it several days later."

"Then you would not swear that it *is* the same one?"

Dummy hesitated.

The lawyer opened a package. He took out a brand new green and black windbreaker. It was identical to the torn one.

"Take a good look at that." The lawyer threw it into Dummy's hands.

"Do you not know that when goods like this are turned out, they are turned out by the hundreds, by the thousands, the same cloth, the same pattern, same buttons, same markings?"

Dummy fingered the new windbreaker nervously.

"Well, what have you to say? Will you swear that this torn coat *is* the one you took from the hands of the man you fought? Mind you, the man you fought, not the person who murdered Cay Pryor?"

"The coat is—very much like the one I found."

"But you would not swear it *is* the one?"

"No—not now."

"And yesterday you swore it *was*! You would convict a man, a benefactor to hundreds of settlers, on such evidence? You would send a man to the *gallows*? Bah!" The lawyer paced across the room while he mopped his perspiring face and neck.

"You swore that there was a green button found in the dying man's hand. Where is the button? It is supposed to come off this jacket you picked up—somewhere *out* on the prairie!"

"I understand that Mr. Shipman has the button," answered Dummy.

"That's all—get out of my sight!"

The Crown Attorney was now on his feet. He asked that Sky be recalled to give further evidence regarding the finding of the button and the piece of cloth. But the cowpuncher was nowhere to be found. The court waited while a policeman looked for the puncher at the horse shelter.

There was a silence.

A banging and thumping was heard from the



large packing case outside. A few of the spectators, within hearing, remarked on the matter, but no one offered a solution.

The policeman returned with the report that Sky had left on what he called an "important mission." He concluded with the statement that the cowboy was heard to say that he might be away several days.

The Crown Attorney was agitated. He paled. He was not so sure of that tower of guilt, that splendid piece of professional service on behalf of his district. That red-haired man of a terrier—his learned friend—was indeed a scrapper of no mean skill, he contended. Damn! Where was that man—that tall cowpuncher? He would move to have him arrested and brought back at once!

The Crown Attorney drummed his fingers on the Judge's desk. He tried to formulate a new plan; a checkmate of this terrier.

Turning to the Judge he demanded the presence of Valma. Up to this time the child had been kept unaware of the apprehension of her father. She was still of the opinion that Dummy and her father were away on an important business trip for the ranch.

The Judge, the lawyer for the defense, and the Crown Attorney, had hoped that the girl would be saved the great sorrow, the terrible shock, that must come with the truth. Dummy had, indeed, played a splendid part in sparing the child the distressing news. But now the Crown Attorney was adamant. The bench reluctantly gave instructions for Valma to be summoned.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A GREEN BUTTON IS LOST

Valma and Eric arrived at the schoolhouse as the evening shadows crept over the hills. One of the punchers helped the girl to dismount, and then led both horses to the shelter.

The girl was perplexed at the urgent summons. She thought at first it was another meeting of the homesteaders, to bring about some new fence or herd law, but why they should want her was beyond understanding. She had grave feelings that there had been some more trouble.

As the door swung open and Valma faced the audience of somber-faced people she was mystified. She stood still, glancing around. She caught sight of her father.

"Pop!" She ran down the aisle and into his outstretched arms. Clutching him affectionately she reached up and kissed him.

The man did not speak. Tears came to his eyes. His heart was breaking.

A gentle touch on the child's arm by one of the policemen surprised her. Looking up enquiringly she gazed about in a puzzled manner. She started toward the cowboys from Pine Needle. She wanted an explanation. False stepped forward and took her to a seat.

She saw Dummy. She was amazed.

"Dummy," she whispered, as she searched the man's face, and then looked at his uniform. "Dummy!" She rushed to where he was seated at the side of the clerk. "Dummy, you—you a *police-man*? A *mountie*?"

"Valma, sweetheart," answered the man in a whisper. He stood up and placed an arm round her shoulders.

"An'—an'—you're *speakin'*! Oh! Dummy! I don't understand!" Tears came to her eyes. Her voice was weak.

At the command of the Crown Attorney, Eric led her to the witness stand.

The girl continued to gaze about vacantly; vainly asking, hoping for some explanation of the mysterious proceedings.

The door of the room opened. The head and shoulders of Snowflake appeared; her large eyes saucer-wide in astonishment.

She saw Valma. Hurrying to her side she hugged her. A policeman motioned her to a chair nearby.

"Doan yo' worry none, honey, Mis' Valma," pleaded the woman, comfortingly. She caught hold of the child's hand.

"Miss Valma Killdare, the prisoner is your father?" asked the Crown Attorney. There was sympathetic feeling in his voice.

"Prisoner?" Valma jumped to her feet. "My father—a *prisoner*? What for? He's never done anybody any harm—he's the bravest, the truest man that ever lived." The girl sat down, dropping her head on her arm and sobbing.

The Crown Attorney was silent for a few

seconds. He was in deep thought. Stepping closer to the child he looked straight into her eyes.

"You've seen Darkness Jim? You know—the Darkness Jim who often tried to *kill* you? Tell these gentlemen all about the man, and how Mr. Eric Pryor one day saved you from being killed. Come now, you remember, it was over at the Kutawa canyon!"

"Darkness Jim? Eric, saved her—" The girl was nonplussed. "I only know that my father is not a prisoner. He never did anything to anyone in all his life—'cept good!"

"Would you be able to recognize—Darkness Jim, if you saw him? If you suddenly saw him again, in front of you?"

Valma looked distractedly round the room; nervously wondering if the figure of the fiend would suddenly appear, to rush forward in a desperate attack.

There was an impressive silence as the Crown Attorney paused.

Outside, a full moon bathed the darkened prairie in a sea of silvery light. In the stillness the long, drawn wail of a wolf was heard, to be quickly answered by a chorus of full-throated cries. It was apparent it was the wolf pack that had recently become the terror of the ranges. The pack, led by a defiant, courageous leader, was stealthily making its way across the hills, not far distant from the schoolhouse.

There was a moment of tense alarm.

The noise in the crate outside grew louder. There was a distinct pounding against the sides of

the huge box as if some great, spirited monster in captivity was struggling ferociously for freedom.

The prosecutor was beside himself. His eyes narrowed. In a second he had decided.

Picking up a stick he struck the solitary lantern a sharp blow. The room was in darkness. Opening the door he rushed to the crate, forcing one end open. He fumbled at the side for a second, and then caught hold of an iron chain. There was a terrifying howl as a huge animal leaped into the schoolroom. The Crown Attorney was ready. This was his last card. But it was the winning evidence; the trump ace! Steeling himself against the wall, it took all his strength to hold the creature; now snarling and leaping at those within reach.

The court-room was a scene of panic. A few of the spectators rushed to the doorway, while others, smashing the windows in their haste to open them, jumped to the prairie.

The Crown Attorney rushed to where Jawl was standing. The rancher felt that he was going mad. He could not think. The strain of the past three days had been too much. Now some person was talking. Some figure before him was screaming accusation after accusation at him. A huge beast, like a wolf-hound, struggled to get at him.

"Darkness Jim!—Darkness Jim!" The words of the prosecutor thundered through the room. "Darkness Jim, you *are* afraid! You are a coward! You are afraid to die! Afraid to confess that you *are* the man, that you *are* Darkness Jim! You are the man, or rather the fiend, who tried to kill his own daughter so that she would never know your

other self, that self of evil, of treachery, of plunder! Darkness Jim—confess that you are the man who mur—”

Suddenly, the expression of Jawl changed miraculously to that of a fiend, a fighter who is trapped. He crouched low, preparing to leap upon this man who volleyed these accusations! The man who was saying that he was afraid!

For an instant, Jawl hesitated, studying the creature that leaped closer and closer to him.

“Cassius!—no, no—not Cassius!” he screamed, trying to get into position to leap at this figure of a man and a wolf-hound before him.

“Cassius! Where are you? Cassius!” His voice pierced the court-room. It seemed that it echoed from the distant hills.

Valma startled. She paled as she saw the sudden, miraculous change come over her father. Her shrill, ear-splitting scream rang through the room. Now the wolf-hound was leaping at her, grasping her dress in its long fangs, snarling and snapping savagely at each attack.

Dummy rushed to the girl’s side.

“Stand back, there!” roared the Crown Attorney. He caught hold of Dummy’s shoulder, forcing him to one side. “Now!” he flared at Valma, “*Now!*—do you see Darkness Jim? Do you see the man who tried to *kill* you? Do you see the man who would kill us all, just like he did—”

“Cassius, Cassius!” shrieked the prisoner, as Dummy and one of the homesteaders tried to hold him back.

Suddenly, there was another long, piercing wail

from the nearby hills. It was immediately followed by excited shouts from the punchers. They warned those inside that the wolf pack was racing along the ridge of the hills at the back of the schoolhouse.

"Quick—let's get our guns!" yelled a puncher at the doorway, while others were already running toward the shelter for their firearms and their horses.

"Hurry, fellows," warned a puncher at the door. "We can pot those critters before they know we're after them!"

The Crown Attorney looked around. The courtroom was almost empty. Valma was nestling in the covering arms of Snowflake. Dummy was rushing to the door.

The prisoner was talking now! The animal held by the Crown Attorney suddenly turned on him, bowling him to the floor. Gaining its freedom it leapt through the open doorway. A few links of chain dangled from an iron collar at the animal's neck.

"Fools! Ingrates! Where is your law now? Where is your challenge? Who is it that fears death?"

The next instant another long grey body leaped through the doorway to the interior of the courtroom. It jumped across the overturned chairs and desks.

Stepping from the prisoner's dock, Jawl stood dramatically in the middle of the room. He was free. He was master. He was alone to sit in judgment.

"Cassius!" he greeted, as he saw the wolf-hound

stop at his feet. "Yes, it *is* Cassius!" Eye gouged, hair singed, scars of many battles plainly showing. Yes, there was the broken paw. Now the creature was holding its injured leg up, it still pained. "Cassius, you come to me—to rescue me? You come to my call—to save me from the—man pack. And—you're the leader of that pack, the wolf pack that has terrorized the country, that pack racing along the ridge. The pack that's waiting for you—its leader? Quick—let us go!"

With Cassius at his side he walked to the door. They were gone.

Staggering across the moonlit prairie, with the pack of wolves—keeping at a fair distance—on either side, the man, led by the huge wolf-hound, headed for the hills and the rapids of Kutawa.

\* \* \*

Seated at the trail-side, campfire that night, Sky went through his pockets for a match to light his cigarette. His fingers fumbled on a button. He was surprised. Taking it out he examined it in the glow of the dancing flames. It was green and it had a piece of green and black checkered wind-breaker hanging to it by a single thread.

He meditated for a few seconds.

Throwing it up he caught it. He pondered on a hasty return to the schoolhouse. Perhaps the Crown Attorney wanted that button. In the fire-light there came the genial, generous, compassionate face of Jawl. A wisp of smoke spirited the fancy away, replacing it with the happy, smiling face of



Valma. He continued to throw the button up nonchalantly as he became imbued with the beauty of the child's sunny disposition and the charm of her glorious nature.

His hand missed the button. It fell to the ground, rolling out of sight in the long, tangled grass of the prairie.

Sky found a match in another pocket. He lit his cigarette.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### THE SPIRIT THAT WINS

October days in Touchwood Hills brought still greater enchantment of beauty and harmony and contentment. The air, crisp clear, had an invigorating touch of the coming snows. The maples, poplars, and cottonwoods were shedding their last golden and scarlet-hue leaves; spreading a gorgeous carpet to fringe the deep, striking, impressive foliage of the evergreens.

The mellow sunshine of this late October morning transformed God's Five Acres to a fanciful garden and the dark forest behind a never-ending drama.

Imbued with the spirit of the day, Valma hurried about her cabin; caring for punchers still suffering from the affects of the forest fire. In their bunks they rested as comfortably as possible while the child and Snowflake dressed their injuries, fed them, and did everything they could to interest the men so as to make the long days easier and less painful.

Now Valma was seated at the doorway, gently holding a full-grown meadowlark. The plump body, with its grey coat and black hood, slender, silky legs and dull yellow beak, caught the eye of Eric as he limped down the fairway from the gate.

At the child's side Flight-Commander was taking a dust bath. Tweekey, now tame and as friendly

as the other pets, nibbled mischievously at the girl's shoe. Across the clearing, King and Blacky grazed alongside each other, while Peter, its head over the gate, mutely begged admittance.

"Hello, Valma," greeted Eric, quietly and with deep feeling. "What's your chief duty today?"

"Jes' now I'm motherin' a mother. Work today will be happy play," she replied, holding up the bird for inspection. "This charming ol' lady's leg must have been shot by one of those mischievous, freckled-faced Harrison boys, 'cause one of its claws has gone, shot right off. I saw one of the youngsters firing a weeny rifle as I rode past, 'bout two days ago. An' this lady is a particular friend of mine. Has been coming back every year for a long time now, an' always makes its nest in the same place. Never mind, beautiful lady. We'll patch you up. We can never give you back your weeny foot, but jes' guess—your wings and your beautiful song will serve you well."

As the girl spoke Eric stood still, admiring God's Five Acres.

"What a real corner of Heaven this place is," he declared, glancing about the clearing. His eyes caught the array of fall flowers swaying in the breeze; red salvia, asters, chrysanthemums, rich and varied, striking an impressive note of beauty against the rugged glory of the background of wooded hills, the waterfall, and Mirror Lake at the far end.

"Tell me, Valma," asked Eric, "what would this place, these vast ranges, be without *you*? I've often tried to puzzle that out. To try and understand all

about you. I've often wondered why everybody in the whole world is not as wonderful. Perhaps we were meant to be. Mind you, I do not want to appear—sentimental or romantic. I am trying to see everything in a very practical manner. But—when you laugh a magic door seems to open. There is a golden shore and—well, I can't just describe it, but everybody seems happy and contented, and glad to be alive."

The girl looked up. With narrowed eyes she gazed at Eric. She was not given to analysis. She accepted things with the unspoiled faith and curiosity of a child.

"Ha!—Eric, now you're talkin' in riddles. Is that what you call them?"

The meadowlark made a start in an attempt to fly away. The girl closed her hands slightly.

"Not jes' yet, my lady!" she cautioned. "You're all better now, an' I'm goin' to let you go—very soon. But you mustn't *escape*! You mustn't go until I *tell* you."

Valma stood up at the homesteader's side. Together they walked toward the waterfall.

Two or three times Eric's lips moved to speak, but each time he stopped. Presently, he summoned courage:

"Valma, dear, will you tell me—what is this wonderful spirit that you have—this spirit that brings so much happiness and help and peace to so many people?"

"A spirit? Eric, still I don't understand."

"It is a spirit! Something that is constantly

with you. That tells you to help, to be happy, and to make everyone else happy."

The child was still perplexed.

"Please don't ask me, Eric. I don't know. I don't know jes' what this spirit is—that is, if 'tis a spirit. No, Eric—unless it is a sense of happiness—that is away in the skies, an' away down in the ground, an' to the far hills over there, an' all the time it is *right here*, with you, with the boys, and with Snowy, like some new pet that came one day and stayed for always. Jes' like a pet that'll never leave me. If it is a spirit, like you say, guess it tells us that there *is* a dark side of life, jes' like a black cloud, but so often it is a misunderstanding, an'—after all it was only like a cloud. It sails away and then there is bright, bright sunshine. Perhaps it's a spirit that must come—some day to everybody, even to the animals, like Flight-Commander, an' King, an' this dear lady Mrs. Meadowlark."

The girl paused for a few seconds. She was trying to crystallize her many thoughts. Presently, her eyes brightened.

"Eric—you must be right. It is a spirit, a spirit that tells us that there is—good in everyone. Perhaps in some folks the good is away, away down deep, an' takes a long, long time to find, but it is there, an' if we dig, an' hunt for it—sure 'nough it will be there, good an' plenty. Even in the most terrible folks . . . It must be like a—purple streak—all rich, an' good, an' especially to help other folks. Eric, it must be—the edge of beyond."

Valma held up her hands in readiness to release the meadowlark.

"Good-bye, I'll lady of the skies. An' don't forget the extra, sweet song ev'y time you visit Pine Needle, an' all the other ranches, an' settlers' homes." The bird was gone like a shot, its stump leg hidden in the soft, downy feathers. It flew round and round, tracing swift patterns in the sky. Valma watched it for a few seconds.

Her attention was suddenly attracted by a blot of red at the garden gate.

"Dummy, oh Dummy!" She ran down the clearing to greet the scarlet-coated policeman. Taking off his broad-brimmed Stetson he met her with an outstretched arm. Immediately, she nestled close to his side, gazing up admiringly.

For an instant it looked as if tears would come to her deep blue eyes, but she was living too powerfully in the present, to be lost altogether in the grim tragedy of the past.

"Valma, sweetheart, I've come to tell you that—your father went away an unconvicted man. The law says that a man is innocent until he is proved guilty. Only these great and silent hills know his story now. And—I've come to say—good-bye." He turned his head slightly as if his attention was suddenly attracted to the distant hills.

"Then—my father is *free*! He's innocent! I always knew that it was a big mistake. He never did wrong to anybody. He always helped everybody he could, but I'm so happy 'cause ev'ybody will now understand."

The child's eyes were dim with tears.

"An' Dummy. Oh, that's not your name now! Please forgive me. You're not goin' away, for *ever*

an' *ever*? Why not stay an' be with us always, Dummy? Jes' like a cowboy, like you were all the time. Now that Pop—has gone and p'raps won't be back for a long time—we all need you mighty much. We all want you to help to find Pop, if he ever escaped from those terrible wolves. We all need you, Dummy. We all—love you, ever so much."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE LAST DAY OF GRACE

Dummy caught sight of the limping form of Eric as he made his way down the clearing. He immediately appreciated the suffering and hardship that the lad had endured and immediately he sensed that the young homesteader was in love with the girl. He felt also that Valma could easily be in love with the boy. He told himself that they both needed each other for their future happiness.

Hugging Valma tighter, Dummy was tempted to lean down and kiss her; then to rush away without turning back. The next second he kissed her tawny hair, then turned and hurried to the gate.

At the entrance he ran into Snowflake as she was about to pass through the narrow opening. He blocked her path. Suddenly his arms encircled the woman. Lifting her clear over the gate he kissed her forcibly on the cheek.

The next instant he was gone.

"Lawsy, lawsy!" exclaimed Snowflake, recovering her composure and straightening her clothes. "Dat—dat man is—duh handsomest policeman, ah evah did see." She placed her hand fondly to the spot where Dummy had kissed her. "Uh—huh, man, oh man, I sure knows what I sure got, an' what ah ain't got ah doan want."

Valma and Eric walked to the opening at the



southeast, where a clear view of the Telegraph trail could be seen. They stood together silently for several minutes. Suddenly they saw the figure of Dummy, on "Captain" cantering across the prairie. He was waving to them—bidding a last farewell. In a few moments he was lost to sight down an incline of the trail.

The boy and the girl continued to watch, hoping that he would re-appear. They could not believe that he had passed out of their lives for *ever!*

As they stood in quiet expectation they heard the noises in the cabin. There was laughing and chatting. Now there was a melody. Ninga, now able to get about but under difficulties, was playing his violin.

From the same spot where the girl and the boy had seen Dummy disappear, a team of big, black oxen appeared. The team was sauntering at a snail's pace along the trail.

"Eric, look—*your* oxen!" cried Valma, gleefully. "That must be—"

The girl stopped short. She called to Ninga, seated on the step of the cabin.

The man, his left arm in bandages, carrying his violin, hobbled to where the couple stood.

"Look Ninga," commanded Valma, pointing to the team and wagon.

The cowboy's eyes narrowed. He searched the wagon from end to end. On the seat he saw the tall form of Sky as he urged the oxen on. Alongside the man sat a fat woman.

"Yup, an'—by josh! That's my Fatima!" he exclaimed excitedly. "An' hooray, there's *Bug* an'

*Bugette*," he added as he caught sight of the faces of two children as they bobbed up in the wagon.

A few seconds passed. Two more faces, younger and smaller, popped up, each like a jack-in-the-box.

"Yup, an'—there's *Jack* an' *Jackette*," he shouted with fatherly pride.

There was a brief silence.

Now Valma was searching with her eyes painstakingly.

"Ninga—look, at the far end, at the back of the wagon!"

The cowboy took a step forward as if to gain an added advantage. Suddenly his eyes beamed with puzzled merriment. He saw two more faces. He blinked his eyes a few times. Surely these two extra—wee faces—were not true? His gaze went back to where he saw the first two children.

"Let's see. There's *one* an' *two*, an' then—*three* an' *four*." He hesitated as he took a deep breath. "An'—there's *five* an' *six*! Wal, I'll be *dawg*—an' *dawg-goned*!"

\* \* \*

A peculiar, unnatural rustling in the leaves off to one side of God's Five Acres attracted Valma. She looked back and then walked stealthily half-way along the clearing. It was the same spot to where the wounded badger had struggled to seek help. She thought of that incident as she tiptoed along quietly.

A streak of singed fur was making its way toward her. The creature's head was almost to the

ground, its eye was gouged, its huge, grey haunches were scarred and burned. From its neck several links of chain dragged fantastically among the scarlet-golden leaves.

"Cassius!" Valma screamed as if she had been attacked. "Cassius!" She ran forward and stood before the wolf-hound. "My father's dog, his . . ." She reached down and cautiously touched the crippled beast. The acid tang of the prairie fire and the odors of singed hair were still strong. "Cassius, *you* come to *me*? Why didn't you bring back my father?"

The animal whined quietly and pitifully. It made a feeble effort to turn its head.

The girl leaned back and gazed at its eyes, the one blind and unsightly, the other bright and clear as a gem. She sought an answer.

"Cassius, why *didn't* you bring back my father—your master? Where is he?"

Again the wolf-hound whined pitifully.

In answer, Valma heard a faint, silky rustle of leaves a short distance through the forest. She ran hurriedly, hopefully between the trees. She stopped abruptly. She could not believe what she saw. Tears came to her eyes as she made out, through the curtain of trees, the figure of a broken and wounded man crawling along the ground toward God's Five Acres.

THE END





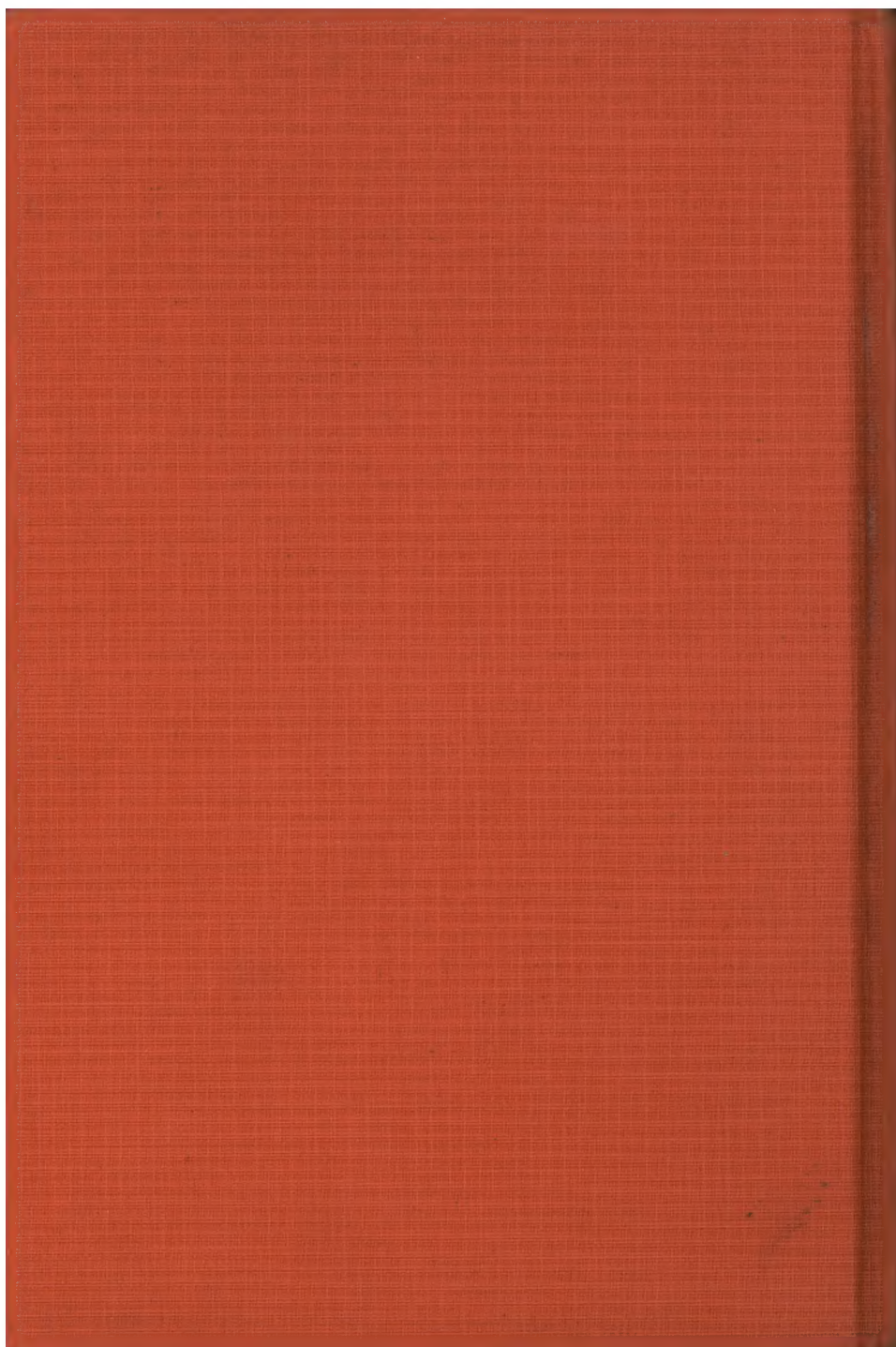




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# NO OTHER GODS

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